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The PHANTOM DETECTIVE

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ROBERT
WALLACE



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Detective

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OF
MURDERS

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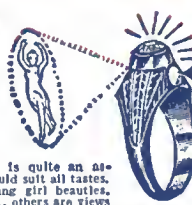


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The PHANTOM DETECTIVE

Vol. IX, No. 1

February, 1935

Price 10c

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173



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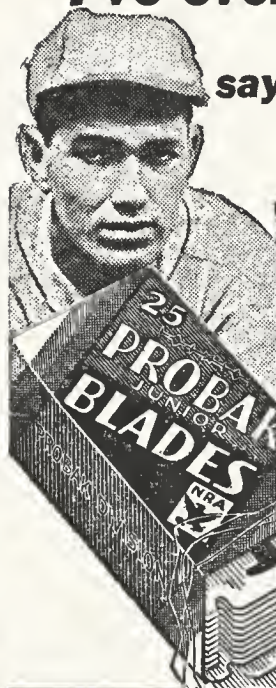
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professional
models*



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WRITES
GEORGE BAILEY

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3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt... a transformation took place... what a difference—pounds seemed to have fallen away!"



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Thrilling News

VOL. I. No. 1

"Literary News of the Month"

FEBRUARY, 1935

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Electrician
Shop Foreman
Hangar Crew Chief
Traffic Manager
Purchasing Agent
Aerial Mail Clerk
Motor Expert
Radio Operator
Airplane Mechanic
Field Work

IN THE AIR:

Air Express Agent
Air Mail Pilot
Aerial Photography
Airport Manager
Test Pilot
Aerial Passenger Agent
Private Piloting
Weather Observer
Flight Instructor
Commercial Pilot
Field Manager
Transport Pilot

in their early thirties, or even younger. It is a young man's industry, which means that there are plenty of opportunities to forge ahead. But just because it is run by young men, don't get the idea that Aviation is a small business. Millions are being spent yearly to develop and improve airways and planes. Thousands of men earn good livings from the business. And many, many thousands will enter it in the future. It is a great and growing industry, this Aviation, an industry that still brings romance, excitement, thrills—even while it is bringing big opportunities and good pay.

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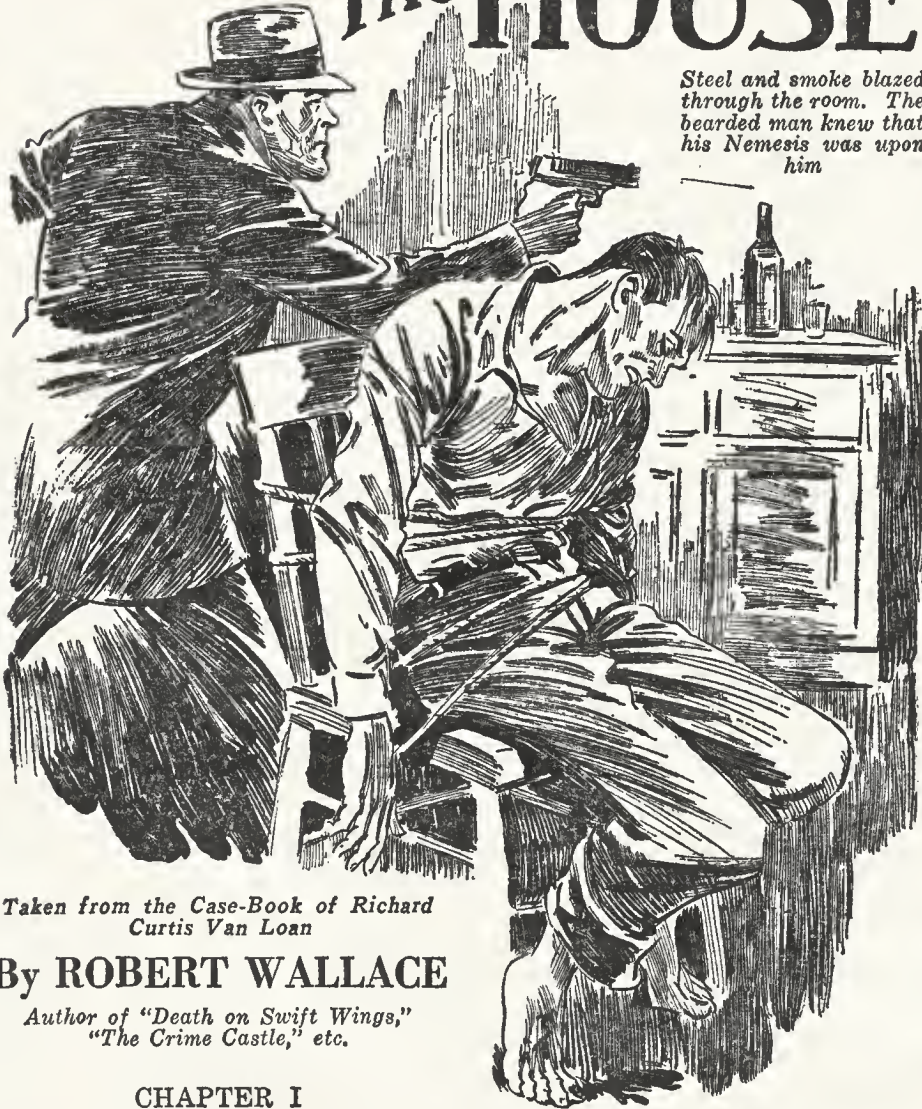
His energetic campaign to stamp out banditry is backed up by courageous judges, public officials and officers of the law throughout America. They are performing their dangerous and necessary tasks with devotion and zeal.

The private citizen, too, must join in this work. Obey the laws, and help to build a strong barricade of public opinion opposed to the armed forces of disorder.

Favor legislation that tends to discourage lawlessness. Help to move civilization forward with the ultimate aim of abolishing iniquity!

The HOUSE

Steel and smoke blazed through the room. The bearded man knew that his Nemesis was upon him



Taken from the Case-Book of Richard Curtis Van Loan

By ROBERT WALLACE

*Author of "Death on Swift Wings,"
"The Crime Castle," etc.*

CHAPTER I

THE KILLER STRIKES

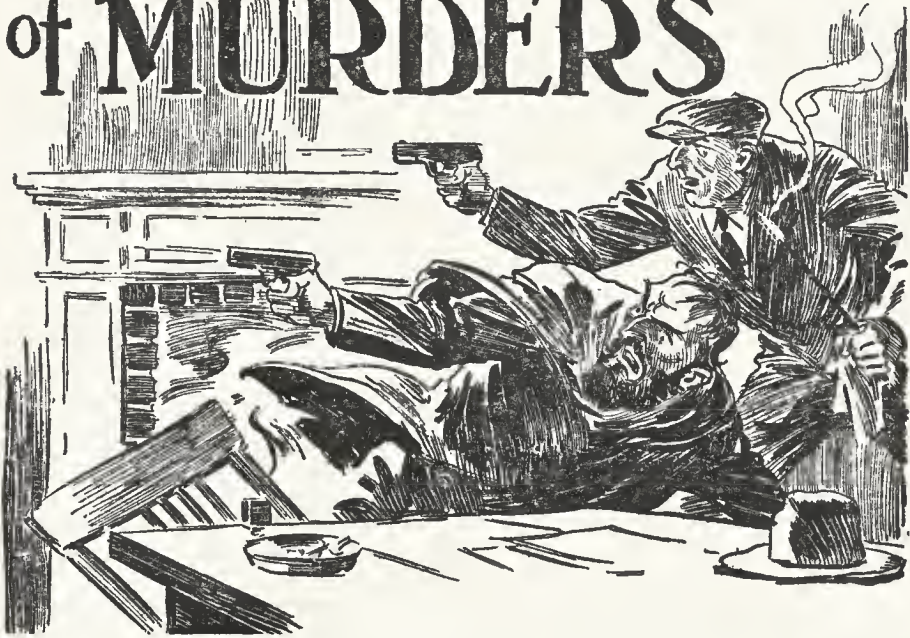
THE tenuous grey arms of the sea hammered relentlessly on the rocky shore of Long Island. Overhead the clouds were grim and forbidding as they obscured the autumnal sky. A wispy fog crawled over the earth like an

intangible shroud, enveloping all cosmos in its clammy grip.

But grimmer, more forbidding than the scene upon which it loomed was the gigantic old house that rose black and stark upon the shore. For half a century it had stood there, battered by the weather, hissed at

Death Stalks Menacingly through a Mysterious

of MURDERS



A Full Book-Length Novel of Crime's Grim Toll!

by the sea. Dark, like the shadow of an evil thing, it rose upon the bleak horizon; and its black walls kept well the unholy secrets which its interior harbored.

The structure had been erected by the first Thorpe who had founded the family fortune. Ugly stories were told of the blood which stained the gold amassed by the family. Grim rumors were whispered about the old mansion which stood so solitary, so foreboding on the jutting promontory which stretched out into the grey waters of the Sound.

In the library, situated in the second story of the house, James Thorpe, the present head of the family, was seated at a huge mahogany desk. His slim fingers rustled among typewritten papers which his eyes perused.

The library door was closed. Outside, in the hall, seated in a chair

by the door, was a man. Though he wore the customary garb of a butler, the man's great physique belied his occupation. His starched shirtfront stretched across a massive bosom. His arms were long and simian-like; his hands huge hams with gnarled knuckles.

SILENCE hung heavy over the old house. Save for the lashing of the sea without, no sound echoed through the heavily timbered corridors. But the silence which gripped the manor was not the noiselessness of tranquillity and peace. Rather was it an unholy quiet; a blank emptiness which presaged an intangible peril; as if Death, himself, came on soundless footsteps from the raging sea.

Then, of a sudden, an abrupt thumping noise was heard. Harker, the man in butler's garb, sat bolt

Mansion of Ghastly, Blood-Curdling Horrors!

upright. His brow creased, and his eyes narrowed. Again came a repetition of the sound. Harker rose, took a step forward to the end of the hall.

He stared up a long winding flight of stairs which led to the organ loft at the top of the house. His muscles tensed. His pulse picked up a beat. Harker was aware of danger—and ready for it. Again came that thumping sound, like the footfall of a shod horse.

Harker's eyes swept up the narrow staircase. A dark shadowy figure appeared in the bend of the winding steps. A long black robe covered the body of a man—a body that was at least seven feet tall. A shaggy black beard obscured the lower half of his face. A black slouch hat, pulled down over his eyes, deepened the black shadow that seemed to hover about him.

Yet Harker did not retreat.

"Who are you?" he said in a low tense voice. "What do you want?"

The black figure made no reply. His shoes continued to make the vibrant thumping sound on the wooden stairs as he advanced at an increased pace.

Harker's frown grew deeper; his eyes were narrow black slits in his face. His hand fell to the hip pocket of his well creased trousers.

"Stop where you are!" he commanded. "Stop or I'll—"

BUT what Harker's threat was to be, the bearded man never heard. With an agility surprising in one of his bulk, he sprang down the staircase like a beast of prey to the kill.

His heavy feet left the step upon which they stood. His body soared through the air, resembling a tremendous black bat as his ebony robe fluttered behind him, like a pair of gigantic wings. Through the air he came, a glittering evil light in his eye.

Harker stood paralyzed to immobility by the strange sight. It was not fear that rendered him motionless. Harker was no coward; the very fact that Jim Thorpe had given him this job was proof enough of that. Yet in the weird hovering shadow that descended upon him, there was an element of intangible horror which froze the blood in his veins.

As the strange creature was almost upon him, a pair of gleaming hands extended themselves from the fabric of the black robes' sleeves. Ten digits were visible. Yet they were not digits of ordinary flesh and blood.

NO. Those fingers glittered like stiletto blades in the dim light of the hall. Cold and merciless, they shone with an icy light like the fleshless eyes of the Reaper himself.

Then, when it was too late, Harker suddenly broke the spell which was on him. He braced himself for the shock of impact. The hand which had remained at his hip closed over the butt of the .38 which he carried in his pocket.

But now the creature struck. Those glittering hands encircled his throat like twin vises, that were destined to squeeze the very life from his body. Desperately, wildly, Harker essayed to bring his gun into play.

The force of the impact of the other's body threw them both to the floor. And even as they fell, those terrible talons tightened about the butler's neck. Tightened with a crushing grip that forced the man's tongue out between his teeth. Even as Harker's head crashed against the floor, the dull blackness of unconsciousness was upon him.

Still and inert, he lay upon the floor. The bearded giant released his fingers from the man's throat. Then he straightened up and walked

calmly down the hall, as if nothing had occurred to stay his murderous march toward the owner of the mansion.

A moment later his hand turned the knob of the library door. He entered the room, closed the portal softly behind him, and stared with his unholy eyes at the startled figure of Jim Thorpe seated behind the mahogany desk over which the countless Thorpe millions had been made.

For a long moment Thorpe did not move. A faint terror was reflected in his eyes, but his face was impassive. Unlike his servant, he did not inquire as to the identity of the intruder. Instead, he nodded his head slowly as if corroborating some unspoken thought of his own. When he did speak, his voice was steady enough.

"I've been expecting you," he said evenly.

The bearded man laughed harshly.

"And is that why you hired a thug as a butler, why you surround this place with a seven-foot fence; why half a hundred half-starved, vicious dogs guard the house?"

Jim Thorpe sighed wearily. Suddenly he appeared very old, very tired.

"Yes," he said quietly. "That is why."

Again the bearded giant laughed.

"AND thus you thought to stop me? Does it not appear strange to you that your butler has not stopped me from entering here? Does it not strike you as odd that I have scaled your unscalable fences? Is it nothing that while I entered not a single one of your starving hounds barked at me?"

Thorpe frowned. The faint flicker of fear which had crawled into his eyes crystallized. His heart picked up a beat. Now indeed he was afraid. It was true. The dogs had

not barked! They had not given the alarm!

His eyes bored into the obscured face of the other. The dark shadowy giant remained standing up against the door, looking far more like a wraithlike visitor from Hades than a man.

And the dogs had not barked!

The poison of fear deluged the veins of James Thorpe. He sat upright in his chair. He leaned across the desk.

"Come, Laval," he said, and there was a tremor in his voice. "What do you want?"

As Thorpe spoke the surname, an odd light came into the gaze of the bearded man. For a long moment he said nothing. Then he took a step forward and tossed a piece of white paper upon the desk.

"Sign that," he said. "That is all."

JAMES THORPE removed his eyes from the ebony figure for the first time since the man had entered the room. Swiftly he read the paper. Then he looked up again.

"You want it all, Laval?"

The bearded man nodded.

"I want it all," he said. "I shall have it all."

"But," Thorpe protested wildly, "there are others beside me. There are others who—"

"I shall take care of the others. You shall sign that."

For a turbulent moment determination and fear fought for control in Thorpe's breast. Then the former, sired of an atavistic courage, won. He shook his head.

"I will not sign!" he said.

This refusal seemed to disturb the other no whit. He advanced a step toward the desk.

"Then that makes my task more simple," he said.

Closer he came to James Thorpe, staring at him like a relentless reptile who exercises its repellent fas-

cination over potential prey. It seemed that the head of the house of Thorpe was held in the evil thrall of the intruder's gaze.

The man's hand moved in his pocket. It flicked out again. Yet to Thorpe's blurred vision came no understanding. Then with a soft, low laugh which had little mirth in it, the bearded man turned abruptly on his heel and stalked from the room. He closed the door behind him and the strange stamping of his footfalls echoed down the hall.

But now another Thorpe came upon the scene. Murray, the next younger brother of the family, appeared at the stairhead clad in a dressing gown.

"Jim," he called softly down the stairway, "is anything wrong?"

Then, as if in answer to his question, his eyes fell upon the prostrate figure of Harker, prone before the door of his master's study. Murray's eyes dilated in astonishment. He raced down the stairs to the fallen butler's side.

In the shadows of the hall the bearded man crouched, his little beady eyes boring into the face of the younger brother. Now he took a step forward. Something cold and metallic pushed against the stooping man's temple.

The giant in black, still holding his weapon at the other's head, now moved into his line of vision. He spoke and his voice was cold and venomous.

"Murray Thorpe," he said, "undoubtedly we shall meet again. But, for the present, your only task is to remain where you are until I have left the house. I order this on threat of death. Do you understand?"

MURRAY THORPE nodded dumbly. As a matter of fact, he did not understand. He had not the slightest idea of what this madman

meant or who he was. But a terrible fear was upon him. He stood still and motionless as the other backed away toward the stairway. The revolver in the gleaming talon of the monster remained directly over Murray Thorpe's heart as the black-garmented figure gained the landing.

Then slowly, with the monotonous clumping of his feet echoing from the steps, slowly he disappeared. In open-mouthed astonishment the young man stared after him. The clumping sound finally died away; and then, only then, did the paralysis that held Murray's muscles leave him.

He uttered a terrible cry. Springing from the fallen figure of the butler, he flung open the library door. He rushed inside.

THERE behind his desk sat James Thorpe. His head lolled crazily down upon his chest. His eyes were open but they were the blank, expressionless eyes of an idiot. His face was ashen. Murray Thorpe raced across the floor. Trembling fingers held his brother's pulse. He felt no answering beat.

With a terrific effort he fought down the impulse to scream that was upon him. He struggled with the empty terror that formed a bottomless pit in his stomach. For a full minute he stood stock still, his upper teeth biting deep into his lower lip. Blood trickled unnoticed down his chin.

Then he stretched forth a trembling hand to the telephone upon his brother's desk. With shaking fingers he dialed a number. After an interval a voice trickled over the wire into his ear.

"Hello," he almost shouted into the mouthpiece, "this is Murray Thorpe. I want to speak to my Uncle Amos. Immediately! It's important."

There was a silence at the other

end of the wire. The man shrieked louder into the instrument.

"Confound you! Hurry! I want to speak to my Uncle Amos!"

The modulated tone of a servant came to his ear in a tone hesitant and uncertain. For an instant Murray Thorpe, beside himself with terror, did not realize the import of the words he heard.

"What?" he shouted. "What do you say?"

The servant repeated his statement, in the quiet accents that are reserved for the dead.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said gravely. "But your Uncle Amos died an hour ago! Found him dead in his library, sir."

Murray Thorpe dropped the telephone to the floor. His face was livid and his eyes were bulging balls of agate. No longer could he exercise control over his quivering nerves. He opened his mouth. A scream of sheer terror burst from his lips. The curse of the Thorpe family had at last stretched forth its bony hand and struck!

CHAPTER II

INTO THE GAME



RANK HAVENS, noted publisher of a string of journals from coast to coast, sat in the luxurious penthouse apartment of his close friend, Richard Curtis Van Loan. Contemplatively, the older man puffed on a cigar, as his humorous grey eyes watched the figure of Van Loan across the room.

"So there it is," he said. "Doris Thorpe, a very dear friend of my daughter Muriel, seems to think that the case calls for your talents."

Van Loan raised his eyebrows.

"Why?" he asked. "Is there any thing to indicate that the two deaths in the family were caused by un-

natural causes? Besides, even if they were murdered, it probably is a minor affair."

Havens shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps," he said evenly. "But then again, perhaps not. Neither the family doctor nor the medical examiner have ascertained the cause of death. No marks are on the bodies. The symptoms more closely approach those of heart failure than anything else. But from the story of the butler and young Murray Thorpe, it's murder."

VAN LOAN considered this for a moment in silence. His fine brow corrugated into a frown. His retentive memory went to work in search of something—then found it.

"Thorpe," he said, meditatively, "descendants of old Colonel Thorpe. They own that weird house on the Sound with the wire fences and the dogs."

Havens nodded. "Right," he said. "And why do they have high fences and dogs?"

Van Loan met his eye evenly.

"Because," he said, calmly, "they fear something. And evidently whatever they fear has now caught up with them."

"Then," said Havens quickly, "you do believe it's murder?"

Van shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps," he said. "Nothing that happens in that queer family is surprising. By the way, did you know the old man, the colonel, before he died?"

"Yes," said Havens. "Your father knew him, too. In fact, rather liked him, even though he was a queer old duck. Even in the colonel's day the family lived in mortal fear of something."

Van Loan paced the floor thoughtfully. And as Havens watched him, a quiet smile came over his face. Well he knew the man before him. Well he knew the mighty urge for

adventure which beat in Van Loan's veins; and he knew that, beneath the present gravity of the younger man's demeanor, secretly Van Loan was eager and willing once again to pit his talents against the vultures of society upon whom he had vowed eternal warfare.

He had not long to wait.

"All right," said Van Loan after a silence. "Muriel may tell Doris Thorpe that the Phantom shall take the case."

Havens sighed, smiled and rose. About to take his leave, he paused in the doorway.

"And when shall I tell them to expect you?"

Van shook his head. "Don't tell them," he advised. "As usual, I'll handle this in my own peculiar way. But I promise you I'll be there."

HAVENS nodded again, then quitted the room.

For a long time after he had been left alone, Richard Curtis Van Loan remained motionless in his chair. A faint frown was on his brow and he appeared lost in thought. Had any of his acquaintances seen him thus, they would have wondered at the suddenly serious mien of him whom they considered the most frivolous man-about-town in their own parasitical circle.

For, save Frank Havens, not a soul knew the actual identity of the ace detective whose very cognomen sent a wave of fear sweeping through the underworld. No one save the publisher was aware of the fact that Richard Curtis Van Loan, whom a jaded society considered one of its most useless members, was in reality the Phantom himself, the scourge of crime, self-appointed opponent of the minions of evil.

True, at one time Van Loan had been precisely what his friends even now considered him. Born to great wealth and orphaned at an early

age, he had fallen easily into the life which his environment dictated. In his youth, enjoying the idle pastimes of its wealthy, he had found nothing serious or worth while in life. He had been content to drift, taking pleasure where he found it and totally ignoring the responsibilities that life places upon her citizens. Prior to 1916, his career had been an empty, purposeless thing.

Then came Armageddon!

Van Loan was among the first to answer his country's call. Enlisting in the flying corps, he soon forgot the inadequacies of his past life as he prepared for the grim game of war. There, over the shell-torn fields of Flanders, he realized the utter futility of his own aimless existence.

There he learned for the first time the fullest meaning of life. Diurnally he faced death above the clouds and came to enjoy the wild thrill of danger, of adventure. Here was the great thing, the zest, that had been heretofore missing from his own consciousness.

Later, when the armistice had been signed and he returned once more to his former haunts, he found the old way intolerable. He was bored, jaded. He found little peace in the things which had never before failed to amuse him in the past.

DESPERATELY he sought for some means of alleviation of his restless, unhappy state. Through an accident he found it.

Frank Havens, who had been his late father's closest friend, had suggested to Van Loan that he try his hand at solving a minor mystery which had baffled the police. Eagerly Van accepted the assignment, and to the publisher's delight brought the mystery to a successful solution.

In this work Van had found the answer to the thing he sought. Once

again he had thrilled to danger, had enjoyed the matching of his wits against those of an unseen enemy. It was here that he had found his new career, thus that the Phantom was born.

Characteristically, having once made up his mind to this, Richard Curtis Van Loan left no stone unturned in the mastering of this new art.

He perfected himself in the matter of disguise. No actor who trod the boards was his superior in the business of histrionics. He was adept at hypnosis and ventriloquism. Fluently, he spoke a dozen languages. Only the inimitable Lombroso himself had delved more deeply into the abstruse problems of criminology.

And his studying had stood him in good stead. For never yet had the Phantom failed to solve a case. Never yet had the mighty forces of the underworld defeated him. And though he had come into close and clammy contact with death on more than one occasion, the Phantom still had to lose a decision to the unholy forces of evil.

This, then, was the man who was soon to come to grips with the mysterious, satanic thing that had visited the Thorpe household on the grim and foggy Long Island night.

A SMALL coupé traveled slowly through the fog which blanketed the tortuous road. The man at the wheel was a nondescript individual, clad in an old suit and a slouch hat. Two unmistakable indications of his profession were evident.

Beside him on the seat was a large box-like camera, such as is used by news photographers. Stuck in the windshield of the car was an oblong piece of cardboard which bore the legend: "Press."

However, despite these clues as to his business, the man who sat at



The bearded monsieur stretched forth a metallic hand

the wheel was he whom the entire underworld held in awe. It was the Phantom traveling slowly and inconspicuously to the scene of his latest case.

He had reasoned that it would be better for his own purposes to come unawares upon the Thorpe family. He believed that perhaps some clue to the strange events which had occurred there could be learned from the family itself. He knew something of their past history and he more than suspected that a skeleton, grim and sinister, was concealed somewhere in a closet of the clan.

Van Loan knew of the forbidding fence which surrounded the Long Island mansion. He had heard also of the pack of hungry hounds which guarded the house. These precautions most certainly indicated that someone within was well aware of impending danger; and that the deaths which had visited the family were not entirely unexpected.

An hour ago, in his own apartment, his dexterous fingers had manipulated sticks of his specially prepared grease paint over his face. His countenance was no longer his own. His even features had now evolved to an unprepossessing plainness. His clothes were shabby and carelessly worn.

His guise was also devised to keep him inconspicuous. He reasoned that owing to the stories which the newspapers had run regarding the death of James Thorpe, the presence of a journalistic photographer on the premises should arouse no suspicion.

HE turned off the main road into the mile of private highway which led to the lonely Thorpe mansion. A dim fog crawled up from the sea, and in Van Loan's ears there sounded the distant pounding of the breakers on the shore.

Carefully, he drove through the fog. Keenly, his eyes peered through

the windshield, observing everything before them. He had, at the moment, no definite plans, but his swiftly functioning brain would evolve one as soon as it found something upon which to predicate a scheme of action.

Now before him, about a hundred yards in front, he came upon a signpost. He slowed down slightly and read the warning upon it. On one side it read: "Danger! Cliff at dead end." On the other, the words "Thorpe Mansion" were visible.

VAN turned the car in the direction of the house, stepped on the gas. The coupé picked up speed. He traveled a tenth of a mile down the road, then his keen eyes pierced the greyness of the fog.

An icy hand suddenly gripped his heart. His foot jammed down on the brake. The car jerked and quivered beneath the shock of the grating metal. The tires slithered on the damp road. Then the coupé came to a vibrant stop, its front wheels less than three inches removed from the edge of a cliff.

Van sprang from the car and cautiously approached the rim of the chasm. He glanced down into the pit. There below him was the sea, and from it rose a slanting rocky wall of perhaps a hundred feet.

Again he glanced at the two front wheels of his car; and a grim expression came into his eyes as he realized that the Phantom had almost come to the end of the trail before even he had started.

Slowly, thoughtfully, he re-entered the car. As he turned it about he considered the signpost that he had just passed. It was incredible that the directions there had remained that way for any length of time.

If so, many would have met their death over the edge of that cliff before now. His brow corrugated



His body soared through the air, resembling a tremendous bat

in thought. Was it possible that someone had expected the Phantom? Or had the post been turned around in order to send another to his death?

Now the signpost came into view again. Before it, a black sedan had stopped. A man stood by the post, his hands encircling its center. Van stopped his own car and stepped

out. Before him, the stranger was slowly turning the post around.

A hard smile crossed Van's face and he stepped forward. His camera was under his arm and his right hand was buried deep in his coat pocket. His fingers rested on the butt of his .38.

"Well," he said and his voice was not pleasant, "and what are you doing?"

The man who was turning the post around to its correct position looked up. He was young, Van noticed, clean-cut and of honest appearance. But a long time ago the Phantom had learned not to trust superficialities when dealing with crime.

"This post," the other explained. "I just drove down here. I was going to the Thorpe house. I found the post turned around."

"So did I," said Van. "I found it turned around just a minute before you did, and it's a blamed lucky thing that I'm not lying at the bottom of that cliff right now."

The stranger looked at him in bewilderment.

"Who could have done that?" he asked in a surprised tone.

Van nodded grimly.

"Who indeed?" he echoed. "Perhaps, you! And now, having accomplished your purpose, you're turning it back again."

"Me? Why should I do a thing like that?"

"That is precisely what I want to know," said Van. "Who are you?"

"I? Why, I am—"

HIS eyes focused on Van's camera suddenly. Now suspicion filled his gaze.

"Who are you?" he said abruptly. "A newspaper man?"

Van nodded.

A vague fear came into the young man's eyes.

"Then get off the premises," he

said coldly. "Don't you know you're trespassing?"

Van Loan's eyes narrowed.

"I think I'm entitled to an explanation first," he said. "First, I run into a lying signpost which almost sends me to my death. I return and find you reversing that post. You've got a little explaining to do, mister."

The other stared at him, stark rage in his eyes.

"You're trespassing," he roared. "You're on private property. Will you get off?"

"If I get off," said Van evenly, "I'll return with the police, who might like to ask you some questions about that post. They might be particularly interested in it, inasmuch as the medicos haven't quite decided how Jim Thorpe and his uncle died."

THE last shot went home. The young man paled; and vague apprehension showed in his gaze.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but no word issued from his pale lips. It seemed to Van that the other's gaze was focused upon some object in the background. He heard a footfall behind him. Swiftly he turned.

There, emerging from the fog were three dark figures. All of them wore caps pulled down over their eyes. In their hands were black, metallic objects. Van watched them approach through narrowed eyelids. His right hand relinquished the butt of his pistol. Now he held his camera with both hands.

A voice rang out through the fog.

"Put up your hands!"

Van made no move to obey. Instead, he replied:

"Stop where you are or I—"

But before he could finish the sentence, a harsh voice sounded in his ears from behind.

"You shall do nothing, my friend

of the press, except perhaps die if you fail to obey me."

Van knew at once that this was not the voice of the young man with whom he had been arguing when the advent of the tough trio had interrupted them. He spun swiftly on his heel, and then gave vent to a gasp of surprise.

For there, in the very spot where the younger man had stood a moment ago, a huge giant of a man loomed in the greyness of the fog. A black beard obscured his entire face. His eyes stared evilly at Van Loan. He towered a full foot above Van's head. And the fingers that held the revolver before him glittered like platinum in the noonday sun.

And the other—the man of the signpost—had completely disappeared!

CHAPTER III

STOPPED BEFORE STARTING



DICK VAN LOAN hesitated no longer. His finger touched a spring at the side of the camera. A dull explosion sounded from its lens. And of a sudden the fog was rendered thicker by a stream of tear gas that spurted out from the black box.

For the Phantom had not come to this scene of death unprepared. The camera was useful in two respects. First, it branded him as one of the press; and second, it contained a weapon with which to deal with an emergency.

Even as he released the catch which shot the gas from its receptacle, Van Loan ducked and his right hand dove once more to his coat pocket. Two staccato reports roared in his ears and he heard the familiar whine of a bullet over his head.

Now his own weapon came into play. He fired twice at the dim figures in the mist that surrounded him. Then with a swift flashing gesture of his free hand, he jerked a small gas mask from his pocket and jammed it tightly over his face.

HE stared through the eyepieces of the mask. The tear gas merged with the fog to make a greyish yellow haze, in which all objects became indistinct. He heard the voice of the bearded man raised in a roaring shout.

Again a brace of bullets whined over his head.

Van's finger constricted on the trigger of his .38. Viciously the bullet spun into the air, ripped through the cloud which enveloped them all. A scream of pain tore through the laden atmosphere.

Crouching down, Van essayed to take cover behind a sumac bush which grew at the side of the road. He realized that if he could wait long enough, victory was his. He was the only one of the combatants who was wearing a mask. The stinging gas could be depended upon to overcome his enemies.

Then of a sudden something pounced upon him from the rear. A man of terrible strength seized his arms and held him tightly. Van struggled desperately. He heard a voice shout behind him:

"Here he is, Chief. I've got him. I—"

Then the voice broke off in a fit of violent coughing as the lethal gas entered the man's lungs and suffocated him. His grip on Van's arms loosened. Taking advantage of the fact, Van swung around abruptly. His adversary rolled over on the wet turf.

Van swung his left violently to the side of the man's jaw. The victim groaned dully, then lay motionless. Then, gripping his gun tense-

ly, the Phantom turned about once more to deal with his attackers.

But too late.

Two more of the enemy sprang at him like tigers pouncing upon their prey. Through the murkiness which swirled all about him, Van heard the bearded man's voice again.

"Rip off his mask. Take his gas mask, you fools."

While one of the hirsute giant's henchmen held Van's gun hand fast, the other reached forward and snatched the mask from his face. In an instant the bearded man had, in turn, jerked it from the hand of his minion, and jammed it on over his own head.

And then, down at the tall figure's feet, a bitter and weary battle took place. Three men struggled desperately, struggled with waning strength as the enervating gas seeped steadily into their tortured lungs.

Van held his breath and lashed out with his left hand at the face of the man who held his gun. His fist crashed against the other's jaw. Still, desperately, the man held on. On his other side, Van could hear the agonized breathing of the other foeman. His grip on Van's neck was going limp and impotent now. The gas was taking its toll.

Madly Van lashed out again and again at the hoarsely breathing man on his right. At last the fingers which encircled his wrist became inert. But Van Loan could not remove his arm from beneath the other's hand.

THE gas had seeped into his lungs, had ripped the breath from his body. He was aware of a grey mist before his eyes. The agony within him burned and seared his flesh. He rolled over on his back, eyes bulging, lips purple.

He stared upward, and found himself gazing into the mocking, in-

iquitous face of the bearded man, whose evil eyes stared back at him through the eyepieces of his own gas mask.

Richard Curtis Van Loan stirred uneasily. His eyes opened. He blinked dully, as he oriented himself to his surroundings. A distant beating noise came to his ears. For a long moment he did not move, then he essayed to place his hand upon his aching brow.

He discovered that his hand moved barely a sixteenth of an inch. He raised his head slightly and with interest looked down the length of his body. Rope encircled him at the hips, binding his hands securely at his sides.

His ankles, too, were made fast. A cruel strand of cord bit into the flesh of his legs, numbing them.

HE felt weak and weary. His muscles ached both from the struggle he had undergone and the cramped position in which he was confined. Inside, he felt ill and nauseous from the gas which had entered his system.

He made no attempt to break his bonds at the moment. Instead, he closed his eyes and gave himself over to thought.

If there had been any idea in his head that the Thorpe deaths had been the result of natural causes, he dismissed it now. Undoubtedly there was more to this than met the eye. In his head he went over the entire proposition once more.

There had been two deaths in the family—two deaths, the cause of which doctors had not known. Surrounding each of the houses which the Reaper had visited had been tall barriers to keep out intruders.

Upon Van's arrival at the Thorpe estate a false signpost had almost sent him to his death. Had that death been meant for the Phantom, whose arrival had been expected by

someone, or had it been intended for another?

Then, the odd disappearance of the young man to whom he had been talking and the sudden appearance of the bearded giant with the metal fingers, had climaxed matters.

It was characteristic that, even in that moment of captivity, even though he lay bound and impotent upon the floor of a dim basement, no thought of defeat came to the Phantom. True, he had been taken prisoner even before he had fairly started on the case. But his courage, his resources, were by no means impaired.

He realized full well that whoever his enemy should prove to be, whoever the brute was that had invaded the Thorpe home with its message of death, he would meet him face to face before this struggle was over.

Van opened his eyes again. His brain, which had for the past few moments been given over to retrospect, was abruptly brought around to a consideration of the present. He raised his head and listened intently.

Above his head he could hear footsteps, voices. And to his nose came a delicate odor which he diagnosed as a fragile feminine perfume.

Intently he listened. Booming down to him through the floor boards above his head came the voice of the bearded man.

"Talk, blast you," it roared. "Who are you? What does this message mean?"

A FAINT voice laden with weary pain responded.

"I shall tell you nothing."

There was a moment's silence—a silence which in some strange way seemed laden with a premonition of utter evil. Then, ripping through the air, came a scream of a mortal being in dire agony. A harsh, sad-

istic feminine laugh trickled into Van's ear. Then again the accents of the bearded monster sounded:

"Let him alone for a while. Give him a chance to regain consciousness. Then we'll go at him again."

Footfalls receded from the room above. Then again an ominous silence fell over the house.

Van Loan sat up. Desperately he forced his wrists against his bonds. But whoever had performed the task of tying him up had done the task well. There was still very little play in his bonds.

Brute strength would not accomplish escape. He cast about for a more subtle means.

SWIFTLY his eyes cast themselves about the cellar. His gaze came to rest upon a small hot water heater in a far corner of the basement. Leaning upright against it stood a long poker with a curved end.

Van's mouth set in a thin grim line. He wasted no further time in thought. Now he acted. Upstairs a man was dying at the hand of the mysterious fiend who had overpowered the Phantom. There was no time to lose.

Hastily he rolled himself across the floor toward the heater. Then, utilizing the hot water pipe to pull himself to his feet, he rose. His groping fingers seized the poker's handle. Awkwardly manipulating the iron in his hand, he managed to open the door of the stove. Within, the coals glowed brightly. Wielding the poker as well as he could, he managed eventually to tumble a fiery coal to the floor of the basement. Then hastily he discarded the poker and rolled to the floor once more. Without hesitation, he deliberately thrust his wrist down near the coal, holding the cord that bound him directly over the burning ember.

Slowly the flame ate through the-

cord. A thousand devils of agony crawled up the Phantom's wrist as the coal seared his flesh. His teeth sank deep into his lower lip and beads of cold perspiration stood out on his brow.

Steadily, firmly, he held it there while the glowing coal slowly released him from his bonds.

Then of a sudden his straining wrist broke through the smoldering rope. He was free!

Swiftly he untied the knots that still held his ankles fast. A moment later he rose to his feet, hastily massaging his numbed muscles to restore the circulation.

Then, without further hesitation, he raced across the basement toward the doorway. Even as he opened it to find a narrow flight of stairs beyond, he heard a dull groan of agony from above.

He set his mouth grimly, as he started up the stairway; and the light in his eyes was an unpleasant thing to behold.

Once again the Phantom was on the trail of his enemies.

CHAPTER IV

OVERWHELMING ODDS



He gained the next floor to find himself in the passageway of what appeared to be a small farmhouse. To his left was a door; the door which, his ears told him, held the prisoner behind it. He stepped forward, placed his hand on the knob. Then he stopped dead in his tracks.

The sound of another door opening came to his ears. In the room beyond he heard footsteps. The booming voice, which was by now becoming familiar to Van Loan, made itself heard.

"Very well, are you ready to talk now? Or do you want some more?"

A low moaning sound was the only answer. Van's face twisted in a scowl. His eyes were cold and hard. Then he froze to immobility as he heard the sound of a footfall behind him in the corridor.

He crouched back against the wall, merging his body with the shadows, as there came into view the figure of a man. He wore a cap pulled down over his ears. He appeared like one of the thugs who had attacked Van upon his arrival.

He was almost upon the Phantom before he saw him. And then, even as startled recognition came into his eyes it was too late.

TRUE, his hand flashed to his hip pocket, but no speed in the world could have been greater than the sudden swing of Van Loan's right. It found its mark squarely at the point of the other's jaw. His knees sagged and he would have fallen had not the Phantom caught him.

He deposited the unconscious man upon the floor and hastily ran his fingers through the pockets. His hand closed on the cold, reassuring barrel of an automatic. Hastily he appropriated the weapon.

He straightened up again and approached the closed door for the second time. Voices assailed his ears.

"Will you talk?" roared the bearded giant. "Blast you, will you talk? What did that message mean? Who are you?"

There was a dull silence for a moment. Then came the cold tones of a woman.

"Perhaps," she said softly, and there was murder in her voice, "perhaps it's the Phantom!"

Something clicked in Van Loan's brain. Then these people did expect the Phantom! In some way they had known of his coming!

"The Phantom!" There was a vague note of alarm in the tone of

the monster. "Bring those irons up again, boys. If this is the Phantom, by God, he'll never get out of here alive."

Van crinkled his nostrils as he smelt a heavy, burning odor. A sharp cry of pain came to his ears. He waited no longer. His fingers turned the knob and he flung the door wide open.

As he appeared upon the threshold, he heard a sharp feminine cry. The rustle of skirts came to his ears and he caught a swift glimpse of a woman disappearing through a curtained portal at the far end of the room.

In the center of the chamber sat a man. His arms and legs were tied to the chair in which he sat. His bare feet, seared and fleshless, dangled helplessly on the floor. Two branding irons were being heated in a fireplace on the south side of the room.

A pair of hard-faced individuals turned and gazed in bewilderment at Van. In the middle of the room, the bearded giant stared malevolently at the automatic in Van's hand.

The Phantom's eyes bored into those of the other over the muzzle of his weapon.

"Put up your hands," he commanded. "And you, release that man."

Slowly the trio raised their arms above their heads. One of the men at the fireplace moved slowly over toward the man who was secured in the chair. With shaking fingers he commenced untying his bonds.

THE bearded man's booming voice ripped through the room.

"You fool," he snarled. "You shall die for this. You shall—"

Van smiled evenly.

"It seems," he said, "that the play is over before it's fairly begun. In less than an hour, I can

promise you a police cell, my friend. You have a lot of explaining to do."

By now the man in the chair was untied. His head lolled forward on his chest and no sign of consciousness was apparent in his inert figure.

Keeping his eyes upon the men his automatic covered, Van moved slowly toward the tortured man. His left hand dropped down and touched the pulse. No answering beat came to his fingers. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the bearded giant.

"So," he said softly, "you've killed him. Now I can promise you something more than imprisonment. I can promise you death."

THE bearded man regarded him imperturbably.

"In that case," he said coolly, "we have nothing to lose. Ricca! Slade!"

As the names of his two henchmen left his lips, his own hand dropped to his hip pocket. At the same time he ducked his head low and hurled his body to one side.

Van's finger constricted on the trigger of his weapon. He realized the other's strategy. Of course, it was impossible for Van to keep the three men covered at one time. And the bearded man, now that he knew Nemesis was upon him, was gambling on one of them being killed in order to save two.

Van's steel slug ripped through the air with a whine like a banshee's wail. It creased the giant's shoulder at the top. A thin red stream ran crazily down his coat. A roar of mingled rage and pain emanated from his lips.

But now his two henchmen on the other side of the room had rallied to the attack. Revolvers had suddenly sprung to their hands. Steel and smoke blazed through the room. The Phantom, his back against

the wall, realized the terrific odds that he had to overcome. He cast a swift glance at the chandelier above him. Darkness should prove his ally, even though it meant a wasted bullet from his gun.

His arm moved up like a striking snake. His finger jerked the trigger. A single round hurled itself through the air. Darkness deluged the room. Shattered fragments of glass tinkled down to the floor below.

Van's eyes saw a sudden flash from a far corner of the room. He heard the thud of the steel in the plaster of the wall behind him.

His own gun muzzle turned itself in the direction of the flash. A staccato report ripped out. A scream of agony and pain resounded in the darkness.

"Kill him!" roared the giant. "He must not escape."

Slowly Van worked his way about the chamber. His objective was the portiere-draped doorway through which the girl had vanished. His groping hand encountered the fabric of the curtains. He breathed a sigh of relief and disappeared through them. Behind him he heard the voice of the bearded one.

"Get a flashlight, someone. Quick, you fools! We must get him!"

Van heard the concerted shouts and footfalls of the men in the room. Still using his groping hands to guide him, he swiftly made his way down a long hallway. Suddenly at his side he saw a long, full-length window which gave out on a garden below.

HE leaned forward and fumbled with the catch. Then of a sudden a light flicked to life behind him. He heard a voice cry out:

"There he is. Quick!"

A crashing report sounded in his ears. The pane in the window shattered itself to a thousand pieces as

the bullet from a .38 crashed through the glass. Van wasted no time. He made no attempt to cope with this sudden new attack of the enemy.

Instead, he gathered all his strength and hurled himself at the window. Like a meteor his shoulder struck the jagged glass which remained. Something bit deeply into his cheek and he felt the warm blood trickle down his face.

His body catapulted through space. Behind him he heard excited voices; scattered reports from revolvers.

HIS feet touched the soft earth of the garden outside. His legs moved like pistons as they touched the solid earth. He raced like a maniac toward the picket fence which surrounded the garden.

He gained the road, trailed by a barrage of steel from the house. Disdaining to follow the concrete highway, a course which would have rendered him an easy target for his pursuers, he plunged into the wooded area on the far side of the road.

Like an Indian he plowed on silent feet through the foliage. Behind him he heard the pursuit. But as he plunged further and deeper into the forest the footfalls of his pursuers grew fainter, fainter, until they disappeared altogether.

At last, when he was certain that he had outdistanced the posse behind him, he threw himself at full length beneath a mighty oak tree. There he rested, breathing deeply. But even as he relaxed physically, mentally he remained alert.

With a frowning brow he considered the events of this, his first day in pursuit of the curse which had come to the Thorpe manor.

And when he came finally to his feet and cautiously made his way back to the road, that frown per-

sisted. The situation, he realized, was fraught with peril; peril and mystery, well worth his hitherto unvanquished steel.

CHAPTER V

WITHIN THE PORTALS



NOON flooded the landscape with a bright sun at its zenith. The fog had lifted from the Sound; and the sparkling rays had forced their way through the clouds.

A tall man, clad in an ordinary business suit, pressed a gloved finger to the bell which was situated on the wall at the side of the mighty portal of the Thorpe grounds. A peephole in the gate opened and a caretaker's wizened face squinted through the aperture.

"Mr. Thorpe will see no one," he said. "It's strict orders."

Van Loan hesitated. He knew that he must gain access to the house, and gain it swiftly, if he were to prevent another tragedy. What motive lay behind the strange events that had occurred at Thorpe manor, he did not know. But in order to cope with this grim mystery, it was imperative that he be on the grounds.

Reluctantly he decided to disclose his identity.

"Tell Miss Doris Thorpe that I am here; sent by Mr. Frank Havens. Tell her at once. It is extremely important."

Grumbling, the caretaker closed the peephole. Van waited impatiently for a long minute. Then of a sudden the huge door slowly drew aside, working on silent rollers within the wall. Van stepped to the threshold and as he did so the eerie baying of a score of hounds dinned itself into his ears.

He glanced about him. Chained to the wall were at least two dozen

ferocious-appearing hounds. At one end the chains were affixed to their collars. At the other they disappeared through small apertures in the walls.

Now the beasts were crouching hard by the wall. Van could see the chains tightening, drawing them back. Undoubtedly these metal leashes were controlled by someone within the house. They were shortened if a friend desired admittance, and lengthened for an enemy; lengthened to an extent where the hungry beasts could spring at the throat of the intruder.

Slowly Van made his way along the graveled walk toward the house itself. His eyes took in the entire weird scene—the baying dogs, the high steel wall, the gloomy old house. Beyond the structure proper a weather-beaten private dock jutted out into the Sound. Van noted a high-powered speed boat floating lazily at its side.

As he gained the roomy porch that surrounded the house, a dapper man of middle age stepped out, met him with extended hand. His face was lined and tired, but there seemed to be a vague relief in his eyes as he greeted Van Loan.

"Thank God you're here," he said fervently. "Doris just told us who you are—how she had phoned Miss Havens to persuade her father to call you in. We need you here."

Van bowed.

"THIS is Mr. Murray Thorpe?" he asked.

The other shook his head.

"My name is Wayman," he said. "I'm the family lawyer. I have an estate nearby. However, I've been here ever since the murder."

Van raised his eyebrows.

"You're sure it was murder?"

The other nodded emphatically.

"Positive," he said. "The butler was attacked, knocked out by a tall,

bearded man. But first, come in and meet the family."

Van Loan followed Wayman into the house.

In the drawing-room just beyond the foyer he saw the Thorpe family. He was unimpressed. Murray, the present head of this branch of the family, and Francis, were the two men of the house. Both had weak jaws, shifty eyes, and a cruel turn to their lips.

Of the girls, Florence was distinctly a dominant personality. Doris alone of all the family appeared attractive to Van Loan. She was a good-looking girl, had an air of naturalness, of humaneness somehow, which was not extant in the others of the group.

But after he had been introduced to the family, Van noted that there remained in the room another. A man whose back was turned toward him, a man who stared out of the window to the Sound.

Van turned to Wayman.

"And that gentleman?" he inquired. "Is he one of the family?"

Wayman frowned.

"Oh, him," he said. Then he called to the other. "Dr. Hamilton, this is the world's most famous detective—the Phantom."

The man turned from the window and approached Van with outstretched hand. Van took his fingers in a tight grip. As his eyes bored into the other's gaze, his face remained expressionless.

But the face of the man he had just met was the face of the man whom he had seen switching the signpost back to its correct position the night before!

"**H**OW do you do?" said Van cordially. Then abruptly he turned away. This time he spoke to Murray Thorpe.

"Will you please have your butler in here? I'd like to ask some

questions, and I believe that he has had personal contact with the killer."

Murray nodded and gave the necessary orders. A moment later Harker joined the group. Van closed the door of the room.

"Will you all please sit down?" he directed.

Obediently they drew up chairs and sat in a semicircle. Van took up his position in the center of the room. He turned to Murray Thorpe and began his questioning with him.

"Mr. Thorpe, you believe that your brother was murdered?"

MURRAY nodded. His face was ashen.

"Why?"

"I saw the killer leave the library. He threatened me with a gun. He said we would undoubtedly meet again. Then I entered the library and James was dead in his chair."

Van nodded slowly.

"You have no idea as to the identity of the slayer?"

Murray shook his head. "None whatever."

"Did your brother expect an attack on his life?"

Murray Thorpe frowned. "Of course not."

Van Loan smiled faintly.

"Then," he asked in a soft voice, "if your brother was not concerned about his life, why did he have this high fence erected about the house? Why do those dogs continue to stay outside?"

Murray licked his dry lips.

"That I don't know," he said in a low voice. "It was a sort of an eccentricity of Jim's."

Van's smile grew crooked. Yet he said nothing. He turned to the group. "Do any of you know what this thing was of which James Thorpe was afraid?"

For a moment there was silence. Then of a sudden Doctor Hamilton

half rose in his chair. His face was flushed and angry.

"I know this," he said emphatically. "The thing which James Thorpe feared did not kill him."

"Ah," said Van. "Then you know what Thorpe feared?"

Hamilton sat back in his chair.

It was a weak explanation, but Van did not press the point. Instead, he reverted to another topic which had also been puzzling him.

"Doctor," he said, "you and I have met once before, you know."

Hamilton frowned. He studied Van's face.

*The bound,
helpless body
of the girl
rolled from the
trunk*



Now the flush had left his face. Doris Thorpe, at his right, stared at him in a strange, puzzled way. Hamilton's face was suddenly pale. He shook his head violently.

"No," he said, "I don't know. Excuse me. I'm quite upset. All day I've been trying to find a cause of death for Thorpe. I'm under a strain."

"I don't place you," he said.

Van smiled quietly. "Perhaps I did not look the same at the time. I was carrying a camera. You were fixing a signpost. Now do you remember?"

Hamilton stared at him. Slowly he nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, "I remember."

"What happened to you? You

told me you were righting the post. I turned my head for a moment. You vanished."

"I was slugged," said the doctor. "Slugged and tossed in the bushes at the side of the road. I came to about an hour later."

"Ah," said Van. "And you notified the police, of course?"

Hamilton shook his head.

"Why not?" the Phantom asked.

"I—I wanted to talk it over with the Thorpe family first."

VAN raised his eyebrows, but did not pursue this line of questioning. Now he turned to Harker. His keen eyes traveled over the servant's muscular figure. The man looked more like a wrestler than a butler.

"Harker," said Van, "you were attacked by this bearded man?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did he look like?"

"Tall, sir, like a giant, with glittering fingers."

Van nodded.

Again his keen eyes wandered over the other's body.

"Harker," he said, "once upon a time you were a prizefighter. Is that true?"

Harker's eyes opened wide. His finger ran over his cauliflower ear upon which Van's eyes rested.

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't it rather strange," Van asked the room at large, "that James Thorpe should employ as a servant a man who obviously was hired to serve as a bodyguard? Did he ever tell you why he hired you, Harker?"

The man hesitated. "Well, he did say, sir, that I was to remain close by his side at all times. He gave me the impression that there was something he was afraid of."

"I think we've established that point pretty well by now," the Phantom said dryly. "I—"

There was a sudden alarmed

shout from the hall. Every head turned in that direction. As he glanced about, Van noticed that young Francis Thorpe had left the room. His chair was empty. But now he appeared again.

He stood in the doorway, staring into the room with a glazed fear in his eyes. In his hand was a heavy .45. Its muzzle drew an unwavering bead on Van Loan's heart. A deathly silence took possession of the room.

"Look out, all of you," cried Francis. "That man's a fake. He's not the Phantom. He's here to kill us!"

Van met the accuser's eye steadily enough, but deep down inside him his heart picked up a beat. What had caused this sudden outburst on the part of the youngest member of the Thorpe family?

Wayman, the lawyer, rose from his chair and approached the Phantom. Murray Thorpe crossed the room to his brother's side.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "Why do you say that this is not the Phantom?"

"Because," said Francis, biting each word off like a missile, "at this very moment the real Phantom is at Uncle Amos' house in Westchester. They just called up to ask us if everything was all right. Cousin Doone told me that they were safe because the Phantom had just arrived there to take care of them!"

CHAPTER VI

THE PHANTOM MAKES A CALL



WAYMAN frowned down at Van Loan.

"What have you to say to this?" he demanded coldly.

For a moment Van made no answer. As a matter of fact, the intelligence which Francis had received over the

telephone was as startling to him as it was to anyone else in the room. It meant that the curse of the Thorpes was about to strike again; that the evil brain behind the murderous machinations of the bearded giant had assumed the Phantom's guise in order to gain entrance to the Westchester house.

Van realized one thing above all others. There was no time to be lost. Every minute was precious if he were to stay the bloody hand of the unknown murderers. To remain here and temporize, to waste valuable minutes essaying to convince these people that he actually was the Phantom, was to bring the life of another Thorpe to an end. And before coming here, he had ascertained the exact location of the Amos Thorpe residence.

He took a step backward. His hand shot behind him. His fingers closed about the knob of the door. In an instant he turned it and flung the portal open. Then in a flash he had turned and was racing down the corridor.

Behind him sounded an alarmed shout. The .45 in Francis' hand spat a vicious slug into the air. The lead bullet crashed through the panel of the door and whined over Van's head. Swiftly he made his way down the stairway.

FROM the room above he heard the sound of running feet. The entire Thorpe family, reinforced by the Doctor and Wayman, burst into the corridor to take up the pursuit. Van sprinted into the garden beyond the house. Around the side of the porch he raced.

The hounds in the outer yard added to the din of the chase by setting up a horrible cry. One of the animals lunged at Van with snapping, saliva-dripping jaws.

Van's hand descended to his coat pocket. A gun flashed into view.

His finger jerked the trigger. The dog uttered a howling scream of pain and fell back, its own blood covering its body.

Straight toward the gleaming water of Long Island Sound the Phantom ran. From behind him there came another report as his pursuers rounded the side of the house. Earth erupted at his feet as a bullet plowed into the soil.

AHEAD of him was the dock he had noticed before. The powerful speed boat was still tied at its end. Toward this Van raced.

Without slackening his pace he sprang into the craft. One hand started the motor, while the other loosened the painter which held it to the pier. With a roar the engine leaped to life. The propeller churned the water, kicking up a vortex of foam.

The boat started ahead like a frightened animal just as the posse gained the end of the jetty. Van heard a cry commanding him to halt. Again two shots hurled themselves viciously from the muzzle of Francis' gun. One chipped the wood of the stern; the other tore a rippling path in the water.

Grimly Van clung to the wheel. The craft now thrust itself through the water at a speed exceeding forty miles an hour. Due north he headed her while, on the dock behind him, the Thorpes held a swift conference to decide how to cope with the terror which they believed had escaped them.

The speedboat's prow cut through the water like a knife, heading straight up the Sound. Through narrowed eyes Van stared ahead. His brain was working swiftly, wondering if he could reach the other home of the Thorpes before the terror struck.

And as he made his way toward the enemy, he considered the

things he had seen and learned at the Long Island house. The Phantom was positive that some of the people he had questioned were definitely aware of the peril which had caused Thorpe to guard his house so well. Yet they had refused to tell him what the dread that hung over them was.

He recalled the words of the young doctor, Hamilton, "The thing which James Thorpe feared did not kill him!"

He also remembered the odd business of the doctor at the signpost. He had intended questioning him in detail about this later, alone, but the sudden appearance of Francis with the gun had precluded any further examination of the queer coterie of people who inhabited the Thorpe house.

FINALLY, looming up before him on the Sound, he saw the tall stone house which belonged to the late Amos Thorpe. The Phantom jerked the wheel over and headed the craft's thin prow toward the structure. A moment later the keel grated on the shore.

Van leaped out, pulled the boat up and raced toward the house.

Then, of a sudden, there was a swift movement in a lush bush along the gravel path which led from the shore to the house. A man wearing a cap, and with a rifle in his hands, stepped out and confronted Van Loan.

"Stop!" he cried. "Put up your hands."

Van obeyed the order. He flung both hands up toward the sky. But the fingers of his right clenched themselves into a ball and swung up with the force of a driving piston. They caught the guard under the jaw in a smashing uppercut.

The man staggered backward, arms flung wide. The rifle clattered to the path. Van vaulted the pros-

trate body and continued his journey. He raced up the back stairs and, without the formality of a knock, entered the house. He ran madly into the living room where two men and a woman stared up at him with astonishment written plainly on their faces.

Van shot a swift question at them.

"Where is the man who calls himself the Phantom?"

One of the men rose gravely.

"My name," he said with old-world courtesy, "is Charles Thorpe. May I ask why you intrude here?"

"Where is the man calling himself the Phantom?" repeated Van. "You fool, he is an impostor! He is here to kill. Where is he, I say?"

Something in his voice held them. The terrible sincerity in the eyes boring into their own convinced them. The man who had spoken lost his air of calm courtesy. His face became ashen. His lips trembled as he spoke.

"He's upstairs. The third door to the left. Good God, he's in the bedroom with Ralph."

"Who's Ralph?"

"The eldest son. The head of the family since poor Amos passed—"

But the Phantom waited to hear no more. He turned and sprang toward the stairway. He took the steps in great bounds. He gained the upper hall and tore down it, until he reached the third door. His left hand jerked it open, as his right fumbled in his pocket for his automatic.

He entered the room. The door slammed behind him and he placed his back against it.

HIS eyes stared over the muzzle of his .38 at a tall, well-dressed figure of a man. He was clad in immaculate evening clothes, despite the earliness of the day. A tall

silk hat was worn rakishly on his head, and a black mask obscured the upper half of his face.

At his side another man lay upon a bed. There was nothing rakish or debonair about this second individual. His face was a dull grey. A sobbing racked his throat as he fought for breath. His eyes were dull and glazed; and his hands were clenched tightly by his sides. A soft damp breeze from the Sound came through the window, and chilled the room like the breath of doom itself.

A blazing anger was in Van Loan's eyes as he spoke.

"Who are you?"

The man in the mask regarded him coolly enough. A scornful smile crawled over his lips.

"I?" he repeated arrogantly. "I am the Phantom. Will you kindly leave us alone? We are about to trap the killer of Amos Thorpe."

Van smiled mirthlessly.

"You lie," he said evenly. "As long as you are free to roam this house, the murderer will never be taken. You are not the Phantom. Who are you?"

The other scowled beneath his mask.

"Who are you to say that I am not the Phantom?"

"I," said Van with a terrible calm, "am the Phantom. Now, will you answer me? Who are you?"

AS he spoke these words, the arrogance of the masked man disappeared. No longer did he wear the nonchalant air of the man he was impersonating. Despite the fact that he was clothed in garments which were characteristic of the great detective, his bearing no longer resembled that of the Phantom in any degree.

His face turned white. A haunted expression came into his eyes. His self possession deserted him com-

pletely. Then, realizing that he was ineluctably trapped, he decided upon a desperate thing.

His hand moved with the speed of light toward the inner pocket of his coat. From where he stood Van could see the bulky outline of a shoulder holster beneath the fabric of the garment. The fingers appeared again, and in them was held the butt of a revolver. Murder was reflected in the masked man's eyes. The gun moved through the air like a metallic snake.

VAN'S finger tightened on the trigger of his own weapon. He took a step forward. A terrible threat was in his eyes and the muzzle of his automatic was aimed dead at the other's heart.

"Drop it," he grated harshly, as for a single instant the two barrels faced each other.

For answer the other snarled an oath. His finger pressed the trigger.

Two staccato reports rang out through the room, two savage detonations which sounded as one. It seemed as if the two cartridges had exploded simultaneously. But the weapon in the Phantom's steady hand had gone off a fraction of a second before the other.

The two bullets passed in mid-air. One of them shrieked past Van's head with a shrill whine and ate into the plaster of the wall behind him. The other tore through space, bit its avid way into human flesh, crashed through human bone, and buried its snub nose in a human heart.

The man in the black mask staggered. A groan of agony escaped his lips. His gun fell from his hand to the floor.

A single glance was enough to convince Van that the shot had taken mortal effect. He paid no further attention to the fallen impostor. In an instant he was at the

bedside of the man who lay there breathing with such difficulty. But even as he bent down to place his ear to the dying man's breast, the breathing stopped with a harsh, rasping sound.

Van's fingers went to the man's pulse. No beat of blood answered his touch. Carefully he bent over the man again and examined him. The face was drained of blood. But there was no mark upon him, save—

VAN'S eyes caught sight of an ugly red blotch on the forearm. He picked up the inert member and scrutinized it closely. It seemed as if an angry fire had burned into the flesh. Then carefully he looked over the entire body again. There was no other sign of attack.

His brow was wrinkled in deep thought as he returned toward the door and opened it. In the hallway were the members of the family, who had raced to the room upon hearing the shots.

Van looked at them somberly.

"Ralph Thorpe is dead," he said. "One of you call the police. Tell them that the Phantom is here, and ask them to send enough men to keep a close guard on this house. I should like to be left alone for a moment."

Authority was in his tone. One of the women began weeping in a low tone. Charles Thorpe hastened to the telephone extension at the end of the hall. Van re-entered the room and closed the door behind him.

First he crossed to the fallen body of the man he had killed. He removed the mask from the face and studied the features closely. He was certain that he had never seen those features before.

Then he searched the man's pockets. They were completely empty, save for a small black box somewhat resembling a match box.

This he cautiously opened. It also was empty. He held it up to the light and examined it more thoroughly. His questioning eyes discovered nothing.

He held the box up to his nose and sniffed it. A faint musty odor came to his nostrils. His frown deepened as he placed the box in his pocket.

Once again his gaze traveled to the dead man upon the bed. His eyes fell upon the two tightly closed fists at his sides. Bending over the body, he unclenched the dead man's hands. One of the palms was empty and white with death. But Van's heart picked up a beat as he opened the other hand.

Within it was a torn piece of paper, a fragment with a rough edge which had probably been ripped from a larger sheet. Hastily he unrolled it. Upon it were typewritten a few words of a sentence. They read:

I, Ralph Thorpe, herewith—

Then on a line below appeared the single word:

—relinquish—

The Phantom's eyes lit up, his brain racing. This was the first clue, however faint, that he had been able to discover in the wake of the tragic, mysterious thing which was pursuing—and overtaking—the cursed family.

CHAPTER VII

THE KILLER AGAIN



VER Long Island night had fallen. The heavens were starless and black. The sea pounded futilely upon the shore; and a south wind blew with an eerie whisper.

Silence reigned in the Thorpe mansion. For a full hour now the

occupants of the house had been in their respective beds. But few of them slept.

The Phantom, after seeing the police take over affairs in the Westchester house, had returned to the residence of James Thorpe. By now he had completely convinced the family that he was indeed the Phantom, that the impostor who had accounted for the death of their cousin Ralph was an emissary of the killer who stalked the family.

Young Doctor Hamilton who, Van Loan had noticed, seemed more than mildly interested in Doris Thorpe, had remained overnight in the house at her request. Wayman, the lawyer, had retired to his own nearby estate.

Van Loan lay, fully clothed, in the guest room to which he had been assigned. Despite the fact that his own gun had shot down the man who impersonated him, he was far from believing that the menace had been removed.

He was positive that the slayer who had claimed the Phantom's identity was not the man with the black beard. Their physical appearances were entirely different. Undoubtedly, the dead criminal was merely a henchman of the giant monster's organization.

VAN lay in the darkness, smoking quietly, as his brain considered all angles of the mysterious affair. He had discovered that the same ugly red mark which he had seen on the forearm of Ralph, had been present on the bodies of Amos and James Thorpe. And that no other sign of violence, no mark of any sort at all save that fiery blotch on the skin had been revealed on any of the doomed trio.

That fact brought him to conclusion number one. The three men had been killed by the same method; and, undoubtedly, by the same killer.

That, in turn, indicated the same motive for the murder.

His mind flashed to the fragment of paper which he had taken from the death grip of Ralph Thorpe. The words upon it trickled through his mind again.

"I, Ralph Thorpe, herewith—relinquish—"

A FROWN knitted his brow as he wrestled with this problem. Ralph had undoubtedly been killed as he was about to sign something. Something in which he relinquished—in which he gave up—what?

Van Loan sat upright in bed. An idea flashed to his brain. He reversed his last thought. Ralph Thorpe had been killed, perhaps, because he *refused* to relinquish something. That sounded more logical.

Hence, in view of the fact that the trio had been killed for the same reason, that motive held good all down the line. The three dead Thorpes had been killed because they had refused to relinquish something.

But what?

Van thought of the grim barrier which surrounded the house in which he slept. He thought of the baying hounds without; the hounds which both the butler and Murray had assured him had remained silent on that dread night when the bearded giant had slain the head of the house.

James Thorpe knew that something existed which he might well fear. He had essayed to protect himself from it—and he had failed. Was that in some way tied up with the thing that the Thorpes had died rather than give up?

The Phantom's mind flashed to the farmhouse where he had been held prisoner, where he had seen a man tortured to death because he would not reveal the meaning of a message. Was there, then, some-

thing about the misery that even the bearded monster failed to understand? Apparently, the answer was in the affirmative.

Who, then, was the stranger that had died in the farmhouse? Van's brain ached with conjecture. Every soul in that house was suspected, he realized. The trail was obscured with false clues, with obstacles placed in his way by those very people he sought to help.

In truth, he decided as he lighted one cigarette from the butt of its predecessor, never in all his career had he faced such an impregnable wall of mystery. But he was not discouraged. Determined, resolute and courageous, he felt that he would eventually triumph.

He knew that the bearded man would strike again. And when the time came, the Phantom would be prepared for him.

And he had not very long to wait for that moment!

A SCREAM ripped through the house; a scream that pierced the darkness like a hellish ray of light. It reverberated through the empty halls; and echoed the agonized fear that was in its utterer's heart.

The Phantom sprang from his bed. He snatched his automatic from the stand at the bedside where he had placed it, and raced toward the door. He jerked the portal open. Then he stood silent for a moment in the hall as the horrible scream was repeated.

It seemed to come from Francis' room. Van Loan rushed down the dark corridor. He could see nothing in the blackness, but his keen memory stood him in good stead. He remembered the layout of the house perfectly. At the end of the passageway he turned and headed straight toward the room that was Francis'.

Already he could hear the open-

ing of doors, the alarmed sounds of the rest of the household who also had been aroused by the cry of terror in the night.

Then, of a sudden, he was aware that the door toward which he was running had been opened. Opened and shut with a loud slam. He caught sight of a vague shadow emerging from the room. He brought his gun hand up.

A CHALLENGE rose to his lips, but before he could utter it, he had collided head-on with the indistinct figure in the corridor.

He heard a dull grunt as his body smashed into the other. Something hairy brushed against his forehead. In an instant he knew precisely what it was. It was the beard of the man who towered a full foot taller than the Phantom himself.

Again he moved his gun arm. But a steel vise suddenly clamped down upon it. Van felt a cruel metal band encircle his wrist, increase its pressure as if it intended to smash the very bones in his forearm. To his mind there flashed a vivid picture of the gleaming digits of the bearded man!

Muffled by the beard he heard a mumbled oath leave the other's lips. Desperately he flung his left fist through the air. There was the smacking sound of flesh smacking against flesh as his blow crashed into the other's face. The bearded man's head jerked back, but still the terrible pressure on Van's wrist did not loosen.

Something moved through the darkness; something which made a clicking, metallic sound as it rubbed against the buttons of Van's coat. A cold, icy finger touched his throat. A replica of the steel talon which already held fast his wrist, closed about his jugular.

Frantically, the Phantom swung again and again with his left hand



*Held helpless
from behind, he
could make no
move*

into the other's face. Full well he knew that the steel claw which encircled his throat could easily squeeze the very life from his body if the hold were not broken.

But at every blow of his fist, the grip of the bearded monster tightened. Desperate measures were necessary if the Phantom were to escape with his life.

He ceased the mad flailing of his left. His attack on the other's jaw was proving of little avail, so well was his adversary protected by his enveloping beard; and Van decided to try for a more vulnerable spot.

With every ounce of his strength, he brought his right knee up into the pit of the other's stomach. He

heard a grunt issue from the other's hirsute lips. Again and again he pounded the solar plexus.

A dull groan of agony came from his foe. The steel grip on the Phantom's throat relaxed. Now once more Van sent two crashing punches into the face of the monster. Again his knee came up. Then, of a sudden, he breathed easily again. His throat was free.

Then the steel fingers which held his wrist suddenly twisted his flesh cruelly. He was struck a heavy blow in the face. He staggered backward. The monster released him. Van heard pounding, heavy footfalls racing up the hall.

He regained his balance in an in-

stant and took up the pursuit. Blindly his revolver blazed in the darkness. Two stabbing flashes cut the gloom of the passageway to give him a swift glimpse of the monstrous giant leaping up the stairs at the end of the hall.

Van Loan raced after him in hot pursuit.

At the top of the stairs, he recalled, there was an electric light switch which lighted the room above. This was the room which held the gigantic pipe organ which the builder of the house had installed for his own amusement. Above that was a smaller, attic-like compartment in which the mighty pipes of the organ were located.

Van's groping left hand touched the switch. A chandelier burst into illumination, flooding the room with light. With a bound Van cleared the last three steps and arrived, breathless and gun in hand, into the organ room.

A moving figure crossed his line of vision.

His finger tightened on the trigger of his gun.

"Put up your hands," he barked harshly.

The figure turned around. Van's eyes narrowed as they bored into the other's gaze. For before him stood Murray Thorpe, clad in a bath robe, with an expression in his eyes that might have been fear. Or defiance.

SLOWLY Van Loan lowered his weapon.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped.

"I was scared. I couldn't sleep. I came up here to be alone. Then I swear something passed me in this room. I couldn't see anything, but I felt it. I didn't dare go downstairs, then. I heard a yell. I stayed up here. A second ago, I swear the same thing passed me

again. I heard it come up the stairs."

Van said nothing for a moment. His eyes cast themselves about the room.

"Is there an exit from here, other than that iron stairway which leads to the organ pipes?"

Murray shook his head.

"Is there any other way out of the room above, besides that same stairway?"

Again Murray replied in the negative.

"Wait here a minute," said Van.

HE bounded up the iron stairway. At its top he found a light switch which he turned on. Then carefully he examined the room.

The huge cylindrical pipes of the organ ran vertically from the roof tree to the floor. As Murray had said, there was no adit to the room save the stairway up which he had come. The one window in the corner would never allow the huge bulk of the killer to escape by that means. Slowly, thoroughly, Van scrutinized every nook and corner of the attic.

Nothing suspicious met his eye. Then, as his gaze swept the floor, he saw something. He knelt down. The wooden floor was completely covered with dust. Apparently it had not been swept for some time.

But in the dust were marks that were at once footprints and yet not footprints. Perfectly round spots were apparent in the grime of the floor. It was as if an elephant had trod heavily across the room and left its spoor behind.

Van Loan rose again. He scowled. Undoubtedly the monster had been here. He remembered the thumping sound the giant's footsteps had made as he fled. One question plagued his mind.

Had the monster made his escape from this room by some fourth di-

mensional method; or had Murray Thorpe worn those round feet, had he now removed them, concealed them? Was Murray Thorpe the bearded monster who had committed the awful crime of fratricide?

Slowly, thoughtfully, Van Loan headed down the stairs again.

CHAPTER VIII

A RAY OF LIGHT



UPON reaching the organ room, he saw that most of the family had gathered there. Harker, the butler, stood at the stair head. Florence, her arm linked with Murray's, stared at Van as he came into the room. Standing by himself was young Doctor Hamilton. His face was pale and a wild apprehension shone from his eyes.

Van's eyes swept the room. He counted mentally, then he spoke:

"Where's Francis? Those screams came from his room, I believe."

Hamilton stepped forward.

"Where's Doris?" he said, and there was an undercurrent of anxiety, of fear, in his voice.

Then, before anyone could reply, he furnished his own answer.

"She's not in her room. I rushed there as soon as I heard the screams. Her bed had been slept in, but she's not there."

The Phantom took command of the situation immediately.

"I'll look in Doris' room again," he snapped. "You, Florence, go to Francis at once. See if he's all right. The rest of you search the house. Search it thoroughly. If you find anything untoward, cry out."

He turned and left the room. Swiftly he strode down the hall. A moment later he entered Doris' bedroom.

As Hamilton had said, the room

was empty. The bed was ruffled; a chair was overturned. On the bureau lay the girl's pocketbook, a handkerchief, gloves. And on the floor, near the door, lay an envelope. Van read the inscription upon it.

The letter, still sealed, was addressed simply to Miss Doris Thorpe. There was no stamp or postmark upon it. He picked it up, ripped open the envelope. Frowning, he read the message within.

Miss Thorpe:

Do not worry. I am now in Chicago and coming as fast as a plane will carry me. I can explain all.

The Man from Montana.

Slowly Van Loan thrust the note into his pocket. Slowly he returned to the organ room. There the family had gathered once more. Van Loan glanced at Florence.

"How is your brother?"

"He's all right," she replied. "He had fainted. I revived him with brandy. He's badly frightened, but beyond that quite all right."

Van nodded. He shot a swift look at Harker.

"Now," he said. "Were any of you near Miss Doris' room tonight? After she had retired?"

THERE was a thick silence in the room. Covert glances were exchanged. Van kept his eyes riveted upon Harker. The butler shuffled his feet uneasily. Then he cleared his throat.

"I was there, sir," he admitted.

Van's eyes narrowed. Murray stared at the servant.

"Why?" asked Van in a low tone.

"To deliver a note, sir."

"Where did you get that note?"

"A man gave it to me. Asked me to give it to Miss Doris."

"When did he give you the note? Who was he?"

Harker paused for a moment.

"I don't suppose anyone will believe me, now that Miss Doris has

disappeared, but at the time it seemed all right. I was locking up the house after everyone had retired. A car drove up to the door. A young man got out, handed me the note and asked me to see that it reached Miss Doris. Then, before I could ask him any questions, he jumped in the car and drove off, sir."

"Did you deliver the note?"

Harker nodded.

"Yes, sir, in a way. I went to Miss Doris' room, but she was asleep. I did not like to disturb her, so I slipped the note under the door."

Van nodded. He lighted a cigarette and considered this for a moment. Then he turned his eyes on the group and shot a swift question at them all.

"What do any of you know of the man from Montana?"

Keenly his eyes watched for any reaction that his words might bring. He got two.

Hamilton's face, usually alive with the vividness of youth, suddenly became impassive, with the impassivity of a poker player holding a royal flush; the impassivity of one who is afraid that he may betray something.

Florence Thorpe's eyes lit up. Her hand, which had been dangling carelessly at her side, suddenly jerked up and buried itself in the pocket of her dressing gown. Through the fabric Van could see that her fingers were clenched into a fist, as if she were tightly grasping something in its center.

THEN, before he could continue his examination, Francis Thorpe burst into the room. His eyes were wild, shining with a crazy gleam. His voice was almost hysterical as he cried out:

"I won't stay here. I'm going away. I'm going away now. I'll

stay in the New York house until I can get a boat. This place is haunted. Haunted, I tell you." Abruptly, he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

For a moment, Van thought of following him, of forcing him to remain there, but on second thought he made no move.

"Well," he said quietly, "There is nothing more that we can do tonight. I suggest that you all go to your rooms. I shall remain here. That is all."

SLOWLY they filed from the room. Van stood near the doorway so that, as each person passed him, he was within a scant two inches of them. As Florence exited through the door her negligee brushed Van.

Moving his hand lithely, with such expert legerdemain that not an eye was aware of what he did, he dropped his fingers into the pocket of the girl's diaphanous garment. Deftly he extracted the piece of paper which he found there.

After their receding footfalls had died away in the hall, he carefully closed the door and examined the paper. Slowly a ray of light flooded his mind as he read its contents.

Miss Thorpe:

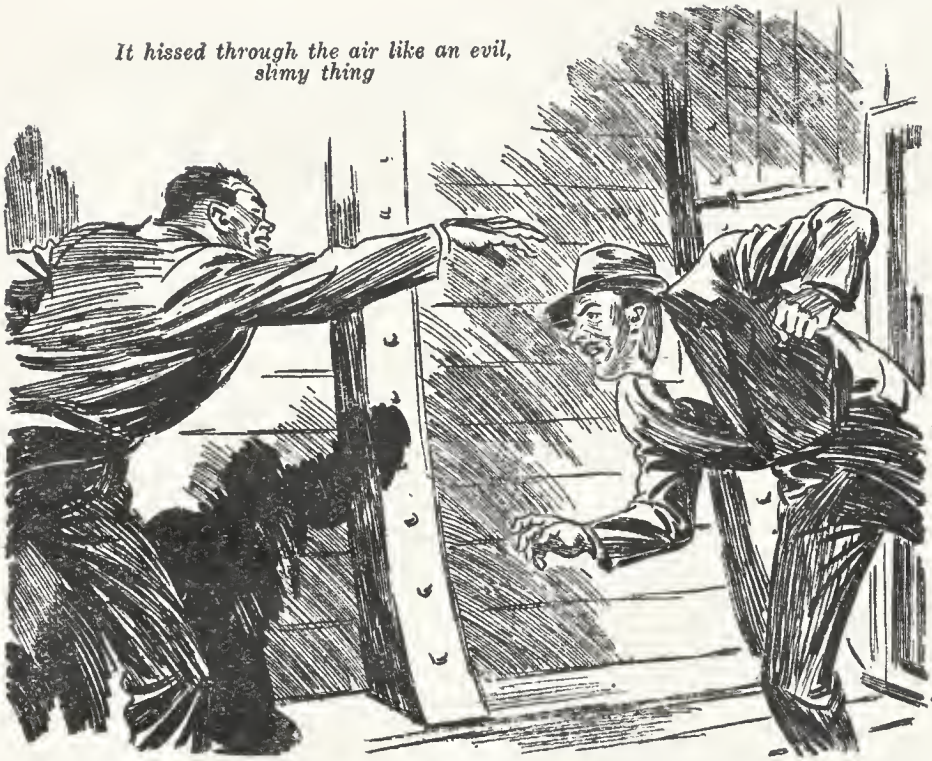
Do not worry. I am flying from Montana. I can clear things up for you.

The Man from Montana.

So, Florence was in receipt of letters from the man from Montana also. Or was she? The salutation in the letter was merely Miss Thorpe. But, Van reasoned, perhaps the envelope's inscription had designated which Miss Thorpe it was meant for. Perhaps this missive, too, had been sent to Doris.

But, if so, what was it doing in Florence's possession? And why had she remained silent when Van had asked the assembled gathering what they knew of the man from Montana?

*It hissed through the air like an evil,
slimy thing*



Perplexing questions, but for the first time since he had taken the case, the Phantom was beginning to see a glimmer of light. He believed he knew at least part of the answer to the riddle.

For a long time he remained where he was, silently, meditatively, smoking a cigarette. To his mind there came the picture of the odd footprints he had seen in the dust of the room above.

Then a sudden startling thought occurred to him. It was the same fact that had been brought to the attention of James Thorpe on the night that he had died.

The dogs had not barked!

Despite the avid howl which the hounds put up at the slightest disturbance, they had made no move to give the alarm when the bearded intruder had come to the house!

Van considered this for a moment. Then a smile broke over his

face as he realized that to this, too, he had the correct answer.

The following morning, Van left the Long Island mansion of the Thorpe household. First he communicated with Inspector Crowley of the Metropolitan Police force and had a guard put over the residence. Another police cordon was being maintained in the home of the Westchester Thorpes.

An hour after leaving the house, Van appeared in the office of Frank Havens. To the publisher he gave terse and unmistakable instructions.

"Get me the best genealogist in the city," he said. "Have him get all the dope on the Thorpes as far back as he can. I'll call you to get the information."

Havens assented readily. He was accustomed to unusual requests from the Phantom, and accepted this relatively easy task without question.

Less than an hour later, Van,

sans disguise, stepped from his own roadster before the Fifth Avenue town house of the Thorpe tribe. Before ascending the steps which led to the house, he carefully adjusted his black silk mask over his face. Then boldly he rang the doorbell.

A servant opened the door, stared at the masked man on the threshold, then shrank back.

"It's all right," Van told the man in a reassuring voice. "I want to see Mr. Francis Thorpe."

He entered the foyer of the house. To the left, in the great living room, he perceived Francis nervously pacing up and down the floor, puffing at a cigarette which he held with trembling fingers.

Van stepped into the room. Francis stopped short in his pacing and stared up at the detective with startled, angry eyes.

"And what does the Phantom want?" he asked bitterly. "You've been hanging around our house for two days and accomplished exactly nothing. What is it now?"

"Perhaps," said Van quietly, "I could have accomplished more, had the family been at all willing to co-operate with me."

Francis grunted but said nothing.

"Where's your brother?" asked Van quickly. "Is he all right?"

Thorpe shrugged indifferently.

"He was, the last time I saw him. He went out about an hour ago."

VAN nodded. Slowly he lit a cigarette, sat down. With great deliberation he exhaled a thin stream of smoke.

Then, looking abstractedly out of the window, he said casually:

"Just how anxious are you to find the bearded monster, Francis? How badly do you want this mystery solved?"

Francis shot him a quick, covert glance. He walked swiftly over to the masked man, and seized him by

the shoulder. A smoldering hysteria was in his gaze.

"What do you mean by that?" he said rapidly. "Are you trying to tie this thing on me? Are you saying that I've got something to do with it?"

Van removed the man's hand from his shoulder. Then he shook his head slowly.

"No," he said, measuring his words, "I'm not making that charge. However, if you care at all about the capture of the killer, I want you to help me."

Francis still eyed him suspiciously.

"What do you want me to do?"

"You said," went on Van, "that you intended leaving the country. Is that true?"

FRANCIS nodded. "My boat leaves Pier 17, Brooklyn, tonight. I've already sent my trunk over there. Why?"

"Who knows that you're going?"

Francis considered this for a moment.

"I've told the family," he said. "And I've told Wayman, so that he can send funds to me. Those are all."

"Good," said Van. "Now, I want you to stay right here tonight. I don't want you to sail."

Francis stared at him. Then a broken, hysterical laugh came from his lips. His experience of the other night had either unstrung him completely, or else he was playing a part to perfection. Van scrutinized him closely as he spoke.

"You want me not to sail? You're mad, man," Francis gibbered. "I awoke the other night, awoke to find a giant, a tremendous monster, bending over my bed, threatening to kill me. Telling me he'd track me wherever I went. And now you want me to stay here!"

"No! I won't do it. I'm sailing to safety. I won't stay here!"

"Wait," said Van. "You may sail on the very next boat. You may sail the very next day. But not tonight."

Francis shook his head doggedly. Van Loan essayed another tack.

"But look here," he said. "Suppose—and it's quite likely—that this killer knows you are about to sail tonight. He'll try to stop you. He'll try to get you before you go. By postponing it a day, you'll trick him."

Francis considered this for a silent moment.

"But if he doesn't find me on the boat, he'll come here after me."

"Ah," said Van. "But he *will* find you on the boat."

Francis looked bewildered as Van hastened to explain.

"Listen," he said. "Let me take your place on the boat. Then, if the monster makes an attack, I shall be there to deal with him. Don't tell a soul what you are doing, not even Murray. Do you understand?"

Francis understood at last.

"Very well," he said finally. "I'll do it. But if you don't capture him tonight, I'm leaving tomorrow. That's definite."

"That's all right with me," said Van as he rose. A moment later he left the house.

A SENSE of triumph was with him as he drove back to his own penthouse apartment. At last he had a definite plan which well might result in the capture of the brute. If the monster had made one attempt on Francis' life, it was reasonable to assume that he would make another; that the sailing would force his hand, compelling him to make his attack at once.

With this in mind, Van called the police again and requested that a cordon of plainclothes men be placed about the Thorpe town house. That would preclude an attack there, leav-

ing only the boat as the scene where the monster could come face to face with Francis.

And that this would happen, he firmly believed. True, he was not sure of Francis. The man seemed honestly upset. Yet his complete indifference as to Murray's well-being, his failure to ask after his missing sister, might mean something entirely different from unstrung nerves.

Van frowned. If the monster did not make an attempt to get to Francis before the boat sailed, he realized that it might well mean that Thorpe was in league with the killer. In fact, things would inevitably point to the belief that Francis Thorpe was the killer himself.

CHAPTER IX

MURDER AT MIDNIGHT



THE S. S. *Renault* stood at her dock in Brooklyn. It was late evening, and she was scheduled to sail at midnight. A taxi drew up at the land end of the dock, and a slim figure stepped from it. He paid off the driver and headed up the pier.

Of a sudden a man stepped out of the shadows of the dock and hailed him.

"Francis!"

It was Murray Thorpe. Van Loan looked at him and muttered a greeting. It was a tribute to his masterliness in the art of disguise that not even Francis' own brother could tell that this man was not of his flesh and blood.

Every feature of Van's face was that of Francis. His gait, his demeanor, his bearing, all were those of the younger Thorpe. Even his voice was a perfect replica of the man he impersonated as he replied shortly to Murray's greeting.

"I came down to see you off," said

Murray. "I wish to God I was going with you."

"Why don't you?"

Murray shrugged. "I probably will, within a few days. God knows who's next on the death list."

Van held his peace, said nothing. Desperately he hoped that the other, believing Van to be his brother, might perhaps reveal something which could be used as a clue. But Murray also remained silent as they boarded the vessel and were shown to the little stateroom deep in the ship's bowels which Francis had taken in order to remain inconspicuous.

As the steward closed the door behind them, Van noticed Francis' trunk in the corner of the room. It was a huge affair, undoubtedly containing all the younger Thorpe's belongings, as there was no other luggage in the cabin.

Murray seated himself on the bunk and wiped his forehead with a silk handkerchief. Suddenly he turned to Van Loan.

"What have you done?" he demanded suddenly. "Have you given up your rights?"

Van's pulse picked up a beat. He shook his head.

"No," he said. "What about you?"

Murray shrugged. "I haven't, but I shall when he comes for me. You are a fool, Francis. It's the easiest way out. What good is money, when the threat of death's hanging over your head?"

VAN pretended to consider this for a moment. Actually, he was thinking of some way in which to lead Murray on, to get him to talk further.

Then, to his quick ears, there came a low gasping sound, like that of a human being who is close to death. Murray started. He stared at Van.

"What's that?"

Van motioned him to silence. He listened intently. The sound was repeated. And unmistakably, it came from the heavy steamer trunk in the corner.

Van leaped to his feet. In an instant his fingers grappled with the trunk's lock. It was fast. He had neglected to get the key from Francis. Now, white-faced and trembling, Murray stood at his side.

"For God's sake, open it," he whimpered.

FOR answer Van took a bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket. Swiftly he selected one, inserted it in the lock and turned it. With all his strength, he jerked the trunk lid open.

Murray, peering over his shoulder, uttered a startled cry. Van stepped backward as a bound body rolled from the trunk to the cabin's floor.

Swiftly he bent and turned the figure over. He peered into its face. Stark amazement was written indelibly in his eyes at that moment. For the features into which he was staring were those of Doris Thorpe.

For a long moment silence reigned in the little stateroom. Van dropped his hands to the girl's pulse. Relief flooded his heart as he found the beat of life still in her body. Swiftly he whipped a knife from his pocket and slashed the bonds which held her. Then gently he laid her on the bed.

Now he turned, for the first time since the trunk had yielded its strange cargo, and looked at Murray Thorpe.

Murray stood with his back against the cabin's wall. In his hand was an automatic. Its muzzle aimed squarely at Van's heart. In his eyes was written a strange mixture of fear and flaming anger. His voice trembled as he spoke.

"You dog," he snarled. "I thought it was you. Killing us all off, so that you could be the sole heir. You murderer! Well, you've committed your last crime now!"

His finger tensed on the trigger of the gun.

During his tirade Van had remained motionless. He saw how wrought up the man was, and knew that it would be a relatively simple matter to jerk his own weapon forth and fight it out with Murray. The man's febrile rage rendered it a long shot that his first bullet would prove harmful.

But even as Van stood there, about to make his next move, there came an interruption.

A clumping footstep sounded on the deck. The door of the cabin was suddenly flung open. The door slammed again.

Murray's eyes stared beyond Van's shoulder and the new fear that flared in his heart was reflected in his gaze.

On the bunk the girl stirred, as if some psychic aura had penetrated her unconsciousness. A dull moan left her lips. Van swerved on his heel. His eyes left the muzzle of Murray's gun only to find them staring into an even more lethal weapon held firmly in the glittering fingers of a bearded, seven-foot giant.

A BOOMING voice resounded through the narrow cabin.

"Put down that gun!" The giant spoke to Murray. And so dominant was the man's personality, so great was the evil force of him, that Murray made no attempt to turn his weapon on the monster who had decimated his family.

His hand shook violently. The gun clattered to the deck.

A harsh laugh emanated from the bearded brute's lips.

"Very pretty," he said. "Three



There was a single accusatory letter on the starched shirtfront

of you together. You've saved me some trouble."

His left hand dropped to his coat pocket. It appeared again, holding some legal-looking papers. These he extended to Van.

"If you and your brother and sister will sign these," he said, "you shall go free."

Van met his eyes fearlessly.

"And if not?" he asked calmly.

Again the other's mirthless, mocking laugh sounded through the room.

"If not," he said slowly, "you shall have the rare discomfort of dying with nothing save an ugly red blotch on your body to show how you went."

Van Loan opened the sheet of paper which the other had given him. And then, despite the fact that he was very close to death at that moment, a surge of triumph

swept over him. He ran his eyes over the typewritten words on the paper.

It was a quit claim to the Thorpe fortune, a complete release. And the first sentence on the paper read:

I, Francis Thorpe, being of sound mind and body, herewith relinquish—

Van recalled immediately the fragment of paper that he had found in the cold hand of Ralph Thorpe in Westchester. The phraseology had been precisely the same.

At last the motive was clear. The Phantom's reasoning had been correct when he had decided that it was because of a refusal to give something up, that the Reaper's scythe had struck down the Thorpes.

"Well," boomed the giant. "Will you sign or not? Arouse the girl."

Murray, shaken and trembling, walked to the bunk where his sister lay. The bearded menace watched him with a casual eye.

Van Loan cast a swift glance at the automatic on the floor where Murray had dropped it. Immediately he feigned a fear that he was far from feeling.

His eyelids fluttered abjectly. He remembered the half hysterical condition that the genuine Francis had been in at the time of the monster's last visit. Physically, he essayed to emulate the younger man's condition.

IN a few moments Murray had his sister in an upright position. At a command from their captor, he held a glass of water to her lips. Now the giant spoke directly to Van.

"And you, Francis. Do you sign or do you die?"

Van bit his lip nervously.

"Very well," he whimpered. "I shall sign."

He fumbled with the fountain pen in his pocket and crossed the room

to the writing desk. Before it, he sank into a chair. His right hand dropped dejectedly at his side.

But it did not stay there.

He came to life like an aroused beast of prey. His hand shot out like a striking snake. His fingers seized the revolver which Murray had dropped. He kicked the chair back and leaped to his feet with a rapidity that the eye could scarcely follow.

THE bearded man barked a sharp oath. His finger constricted on the trigger of his gun. At the precise moment that the stabbing flash which presaged death left its barrel, Van threw himself to the floor.

His own weapon spoke. But his aim was distorted by the position of his body. A slug whistled over the giant's head and buried itself in the bulkhead of the cabin.

But now that the weapons had flared, the bearded monster realized that his was the disadvantage. Those reports would undoubtedly have been heard. In a few moments at best, some of the crew would be here to investigate. Now his sole thought was of escape.

Before Van could fire again the giant's finger reached out and jabbed the light switch near the door. The cabin was plunged into darkness. He fired a single parting shot in the direction where he had last seen Van. But the Phantom was no longer there.

Immediately the switch had been touched, he had crawled a few feet to the left and it was those few feet which saved his life at that moment. The steel-jacketed slug from the other's gun ricocheted off the floor where Van's body had been but a moment before.

The cabin door opened; a body slipped through. Then the panel closed again.

By now Doris had recovered con-

sciousness. Van heard her utter a sharp scream of terror as he rose and dashed to the door.

He turned the lights on again, and shouted a swift command to Murray.

"Get your sister out of here. Return to the house and wait for me. The police will protect you there."

He jerked open the stateroom door, his gun still smoking in his hand, and prepared to give swift pursuit to the fleeing killer. But even as he pulled the door open, a trio of blue-coated officers swarmed into the room. Weapons glinted menacingly in their hands.

A gun muzzle thrust itself into the pit of Van's stomach.

"Not so fast," a voice growled into his ear. "Put up that gun and do a little explaining, mister."

Van's left hand fumbled for a moment inside his vest. Then it came to view again.

"Look," he said, extending his open palm to them. "Do you know what that is?"

Three pairs of eyes stared into the gleaming jewel which Van's hand contained. On the background of argent platinum was superimposed a tiny mask composed of brilliant diamonds.

ONE of the officers gasped. He stepped back a pace and removed his gun from Van's anatomy.

"God," he said in awed accents. "The Phantom!"

"Precisely," said Van swiftly. "I am after a man who just left this room. Will you gentlemen be kind enough to call the police, and see that no one leaves this boat until they have arrived?"

The officers leaped to do his bidding. Van raced along the long passageway, his keen eyes searching for the bearded man who, by now, had a full two minutes' start.

Frantically he covered the ground

going on to search every nook and corner of the vessel. But his labor bore no fruit. Upon inquiry, the man stationed at the gangplank assured him that no one answering the bearded giant's description had left the ship. The Phantom had indeed reached a dead end.

CHAPTER X

THE ENEMY CLOSES IN



VAN was still desperately seeking his quarry, when he heard a familiar voice at his side.

"I'd swear to God," said Crowley, "that you're Francis Thorpe. But the second mate tells me that it's the Phantom I'm addressing."

Van nodded grimly.

"What's happened?" Crowley inquired.

Van told him briefly of the visit to Francis' stateroom of the man who dealt death, of his escape and of Van's own futile search for him.

Crowley frowned.

"And what of Doris and Murray?" he asked. "Where are they?"

The second mate, who had identified the Phantom, answered.

"We took the lady and gentleman from the cabin to the captain's quarters. They'll be safe there."

"Okay," said Van. "Have your men search every inch of the ship, Inspector. You and I'll go below to see if we can find any clue in the stateroom."

Crowley nodded. He issued the necessary orders and a moment later joined Van at the companionway. Together they went below.

Van opened the stateroom door. The light had been turned out. His hand touched the switch, and the room was illuminated just as Crowley entered behind him and closed the door. Then for a second the pair of them stood stock still on the

threshold, staring in utter bewilderment at the sight that met their eyes.

For there, lying prone in the center of the floor, his dinner clothes completely disheveled, lay Francis Thorpe.

Blood streamed down from his temple; and there was a second crimson stain on the forefinger of his right hand.

His left sleeve was partially rolled up. On the exposed forearm was an ugly red splotch. And a cabalistic stain gleamed on his starched white shirtfront.

CROWLEY took a step forward. First he stared at the face of the dead man. The mouth was twisted and contorted in agony. The hands were clenched into tight fists. He looked like a man who had died in great agony.

Then the inspector stared at Van. It was an eerie sensation to stare at a dead man on the floor, and then at a very much alive man at his side, when each of those men wore precisely the same faces. It was as if Francis Thorpe's ghost had sprung from his corpse and stood staring at the shell which once had been his body.

Crowley moved nearer. He bent down and stared at the shirtfront. Then he cried out:

"Look! Look here! It's not just a stain."

Van Loan moved forward. His eyes followed the direction of the policeman's finger. There, written indelibly for the world to see, was a single accusatory letter on Francis' shirtfront.

And that was the letter M!

"See," went on Crowley, mentioning what Van's lightning brain had already told him, "that wound on the temple drew blood. Francis Thorpe used that blood for the ink, and his finger for the pencil. He

wrote the letter M as he died. You see?"

Van nodded.

"He was trying to tell us who killed him."

"Exactly," said Crowley triumphantly. "And he succeeded."

Van looked at him inquiringly.

"Sure," said the inspector impatiently. "The case is broken now. Don't you see it? M, man. M for Murray!"

"M for Murray," repeated Van slowly, as his eyes stared down at the crimson initial which might well send a man to his death. "M for Murray, eh, Crowley? No, I hardly think you're right this time."

"But why not? It's open and shut. It's—"

But that was one sentence which the inspector was never destined to finish.

"Neither of you shall move. You are completely covered!"

DESPITE the injunction, both Van and the inspector looked in the direction of the voice. There, through the porthole, extended a glittering hand. Those metallic fingers gripped the butt of a revolver. Behind the weapon shone a pair of malevolent eyes, burning in the bearded face.

Crowley growled a vicious oath as he realized their predicament, but Van's face remained impassive. If he had failed to find the monster, the next best thing was that the monster should find him. At least he had established a contact again. And if he was in the other's power, he trusted his own wits, his own courage, to extricate him from the trap.

A mocking laugh floated in from the port.

"You have served me well, Mr. Phantom," said the bearded giant. "I extracted the truth from Francis before he died. Now he is gone and

you are my prisoner. You shall find that death can touch meddlers as easily as it can touch the Thorpes."

Van said nothing. Behind him he heard the door softly opening. His heart leaped for a moment.

Perhaps these were some of the ship's officers. Perhaps a rescue was at hand. But the giant's next words aborted that hope before it was fairly born.

"CLOSE that door, you fools. Knock the inspector out. I do not want him. Throw the other through the port. We'll pick him up out here. Hurry, now."

With a sinking heart Van realized that those who had just entered the cabin were men of the enemy. He turned his head slightly. A grim trio, armed with .38s, was behind him. The ruthless bearded killer covered him from the other side. Fight would prove futile. He and the inspector would be mowed down like rats in a trap.

Van stood there, holding himself in check, as one of the newcomers approached Crowley. The man clubbed his gun and held it above his head.

Then he brought it crashing down upon the inspector's skull.

Crowley's knees buckled beneath him. Without a sound he fell to the floor. Van's nails bit into his palms as he fought to keep himself from avenging this attack upon a man held helpless by three gun muzzles.

"All right. Now hurry," said the voice from the port sharply. "Grab him and throw him out here. We'll get him."

One of the bearded giant's henchmen moved forward. He thrust a gun into Van's back.

"March," he said.

Van moved toward the large port-hole. He was suddenly and unceremoniously lifted from behind and

his head was thrust through the gaping aperture.

He was aware of a cruel, malevolent grimace behind that beard. Held helpless from behind, he could make no move. The bearded monster raised his gun barrel slightly. Then he crashed it down on Van's temple.

Jagged lightning passed before the Phantom's eyes. His head ached with a blinding streak of pain. Then the lightning evanesced, and the complete blackness of unconsciousness was upon him.

Silent and still he lay in the stern of the small motor boat in which the monster had stood. The engine chugged monotonously in the water; and the Phantom was once again in the cruel, relentless hands of a murdering maniac.

No sooner had the mad trail which Van had been following become a little clearer, than the enemy had closed in upon him. He had been taken captive before he could test the truth of the theories which he had evolved.

CHAPTER XI

SENTENCED!



IN the Sound, a cabin cruiser lay at anchor. Night had settled about her sleek white hull, staining it with blackness. Slowly the tide attained the ebb, causing the craft to tug gently at her anchor chains as if she were eager to be off to sea with the drifting waters.

But aboard the craft the scene was not so peaceful, so quiet. Hard-faced, grim men sat in her cabins, breathing air that was blue with tobacco smoke. And in a small cabin behind her bridge, a gigantic bearded man loosed the bonds which held his captive.

Van flexed his muscles as the bearded monster released him. It

was a relief to be clear of the cruel thongs which had cut deeply, agonizingly, into the flesh of his wrists and ankles.

But that sense of relief did not deceive him. It was not freedom that lay before him. He realized full well that he had been freed only that he might be prepared for a fate worse than incarceration.

As he gazed into the hateful eyes of his captor, he saw little there that might be translated as mercy; little that might be translated as anything save a maniacal desire to obliterate the enemies of the monster from the face of the earth.

With chair backs tilted up against the bulkhead, two other men sat in the room. Revolvers dangled loosely in their hands and they regarded the prisoner with mild interest; but Van knew that that mildness would evolve to murderous vehemence should he make the slightest effort to escape the fate that was upon him.

But despite the exigencies of the situation, the Phantom had not given up hope. True, at the present moment he was helpless in the hands of the enemy. True, Death himself, his old fleshless friend, was standing shoulder to shoulder with him. Yet he found one spot of solace.

For the first time since he had embarked upon the case, he had something definite to work on. At last his brain was beginning to pierce the blanket of mystery which surrounded the enigma; was at last commencing to separate the tangled skeins which thus far had strangled all reasonable theory.

HE thought for a moment of the letter written in blood on the doomed Francis Thorpe's shirtfront. In fact, Van had thought about that a great deal during his trip from the *Renault* to this cabin cruiser.

Half the motive, at least, was

clear to him now; and the identity of the killer was suspected, though of the latter fact he was by no means certain.

During his ride to his present floating prison, the Phantom's brain had not been inactive, even though his cramped muscles had. He knew that the first thing he must do when he arrived at his destination, was to stall for time. Time was essential if he was to avoid being slain out of hand by his savage captor. And in respect to this particular angle, he already had an idea.

THE bearded terror towered over him as Van stretched himself. His malevolent face contorted with contempt as he stared at the Phantom.

"Well," he said and his voice was a symphony of hate, "stretch well before you die, my friend."

Van turned toward him and brought into play every faculty of his histrionic ability. Written on his face as he confronted the other was unmistakable fear and panic. His eyelids fluttered; his cheeks were pale; and in the depths of his eyes was the flickering, terrified light that marks the coward.

"I'll sign," he screamed. "I'll sign the paper. I'll give up the money. Oh, for God's sake give me another chance. Let me sign and let me go."

For a moment an expression of puzzlement came over the face of the monster. The evil in his gaze was momentarily clouded by bewilderment. And before he could make up his mind to the meaning of this outburst, Van embarked upon another.

"I would have signed at once," he moaned, "if I had not listened to the Phantom. I thought that he could help me, but I was a fool. Please give me another chance."

Eagerly Van watched his captor

as he uttered the words. He was now staking everything on his ability to convince the mad killer that he was the real Francis, that the dead man in the cabin was the Phantom.

True, the monster had told him that Francis had revealed the impersonation before he died; but Van still hoped to convince him that that story had merely been a desperate attempt of the Phantom to save his own skin. Van's heart picked up a beat as already he saw a flicker of credulity in the other's eye.

The bearded man took a step forward. His uncanny metal fingers gleamed dully in the semi-darkness of the cabin. Not only credulity shone in his wicked eyes now, but also a wild, surging triumph.

"Do you mean," he asked hoarsely, "that you are really Francis?"

Van nodded emphatically.

"Yes," he said, "I am Francis. I will sign what you want. Only let me go. Do not kill me."

The bearded one's breath came faster.

"Do you mean," he said in a voice that was hoarse with excitement, "do you mean that I have killed the Phantom? That it is the Phantom who is dead?"

"Yes," jabbered Van, "you have killed the Phantom. The policeman and I were looking for him, when you captured me. But let me sign, then let me go."

For a long moment the other regarded him. His steel talons drummed a thoughtful tattoo on the edge of a nearby table. Then his initial excitement at the thought of having slain the great sleuth abated. He became calmer.

"I AM a man who takes no chances," he said harshly. "Perhaps what you say is true. Perhaps not. I must have definite proof. Have you any to offer?"

Of course Van Loan had none. Definite proof of a thing which was not true was impossible. The only weapon he had to persuade the other of the veracity of his story was his own ability of conviction, his own superlative acting talents.

Dully, like a crushed, disappointed man, he shook his head.

"I cannot prove it," he groaned. "But I am Francis! You've got to believe me."

For a moment his captor considered this. Then he spoke abruptly, with an air of a man who has suddenly made a decision.

"Very well. If you have no proof to offer, I shall go in search of some myself. I shall be back in a moment." He turned to the seemingly lackadaisical guards. "Watch him. Do not let him escape."

The thugs nodded as their master slammed the door of the cabin. His departing footfalls echoed along the deck.

VAN stood silent, as the bearded one left. What was in the back of the man's head, he had no means of knowing. However, he prepared himself to meet any test of identity that the other might devise.

Less than five minutes later the clumping sound on the deck outside presaged the return of the monster. The cabin door was thrust open and the towering figure entered. The door slammed behind him.

His cruel eyes met those of Van. "Turn around," he snapped.

Puzzled, Van obeyed. He had not the slightest idea of the other's intention, yet a single glance at the armed guards convinced him that he could follow no other course than obedience.

He swung around on his heel and faced the blank wall of the cabin. Behind him he felt the cold touch of metal as the giant placed his steel fingers upon the collar of his

shirt. The icy fingers tightened about the fabric, then jerked downward.

The cloth ripped. Van stood stock still, the upper half of his back exposed.

The bearded monster stared at Van Loan's back. Hate and murder were reflected in his unholy gaze. His steel hand hissed through the air like a striking snake and landed cruelly on the side of Van's face. He spoke, and his voice was jagged ice as he delivered his death sentence.

"You have lied," he said, and his tone was thick with rage. "You are the Phantom. Francis Thorpe has a brown birthmark upon his shoulder blade. You do not possess that mark. Hence, Francis Thorpe is dead, dead upon the *Renault*. You the Phantom, live—but not for long."

He turned and faced one of his men.

"Garner," he snapped, "take this man into the forward hold. Kill him with a knife. I prefer not to have the sound of a shot in the harbor at this hour."

The man called Garner rose, rose and thrust a sharp steel blade into the flesh of Van Loan's back. He flung open the cabin door. The pressure of the blade increased. Van marched out onto the deck, his executioner following directly behind him.

CHAPTER XII

KILLER'S END



BOTH of them, the killer and the doomed man, made their way toward a hatch at the bow of the craft. There, the left hand of his escort gripped Van's arm. A stentorian voice ripped into his ear.

"Down there!"

The knife punctured the skin of

his back and a thin trickle of blood ran down to his trouser top. With his jaw set grimly, Van obeyed the other's order. Swiftly he stepped to the companionway and descended into the hull of the vessel. A single electric bulb lighted the corridor below. On the left of the forecastle was a small door.

Again the voice spoke.

"In there."

Van's hand turned the doorknob and he entered a small room at the extreme bow of the ship. It was dim, and triangular at the front, where the ship's prow narrowed to a thin cutting strip. In a wall bracket an oil lantern burned dully, casting eerie, flickering shadows about the room.

BEHIND him the door slammed. The knife's pressure against his back decreased slightly, indicating that his captor had come to a halt. Van stopped dead in the center of the room.

His face was bland, impassive, yet his senses were vibrantly alert. His muscles were tensed and ready for action. He heard a faint footfall behind him. He gathered that his executioner had moved away.

Now for the third time that hard relentless voice spoke.

"Turn around."

Van pivoted on his heel. Garner stood with his back against the wall and an ugly, cruel expression upon his face. His black eyes shone with murderer's lust. His right hand before him balanced the knife delicately.

Van stared at him. Obviously the man was expert enough with the knife. It seemed apparent now that he intended to end the Phantom's career by throwing the blade. The weapon now seesawed gently on his forefinger which rested beneath its half, precisely at the point of balance.

Van's eyes narrowed. Full well he knew the capabilities of those trained in knife-throwing. The blade, he knew, could travel with a speed that deceived the keenest eye; could hiss through the air and plunge deep into a human heart before a man had time to move out of the way.

But his eyes did not watch the knife. Instead, they were riveted upon the eyes of the other.

It was an old fighter's trick. He knew that the moment the man was ready to hurl his weapon, his eyes would focus upon the target; and with that second's warning, there was a possibility that Van could move in time to miss the glittering weapon whose blade thirsted for his blood.

Then, of a sudden, Garner, holding the handle of the knife in his left hand, turned the blade toward Van and seized its glittering point with his right. His eyes stared across the room.

For a moment his gaze traveled over Van's body; then it settled, the two narrowed pupils coming to rest exactly over Van's heart.

This was the instant for which Van Loan had waited. He hesitated no longer. He did not wait for the knife to leave the other's hand; and by that action his life was saved.

Swiftly, he flung his body to one side. His head ducked down, at precisely the same instant that the glittering blade left Garner's hand.

STRAIGHT and true the steel shot across the room, its blade pointed outward. It hissed through the air like an evil, slimy thing, and its point clanged against the steel bulkhead on the far side of the room.

Then, like a tiger springing upon its prey, Van leaped forward. His arms closed about the other's torso and bore him to the ground. The startled amazement of Garner made

him an easy victim to Van's initial attack.

The pair of them fell to the floor. Van's right hand swung up in an arc and crashed against the other's face. Garner grunted, shifted his head slightly and evaded the full force of the blow.

Then he began to fight in grim earnest. He was strong, and possessed of a certain desperate courage. Now that he had recovered from his first surprise, he rallied and threw himself desperately into the struggle.

MADLY they rolled about the confined space of the cabin. Neither of them was armed. It was a contest of brute strength. Garner's wiry hands fumbled at Van's throat; then, finding the hold they wanted, gripped hard. His fingers jammed themselves into Van's jugular, cutting off the supply of air in his windpipe.

Van's fingers caught at the man's wrist and applied a wicked pressure to the bones. A dread silence pervaded the room, broken only by the rasping sound of stertorous breathing as both men fought desperately for dominance.

Garner rolled over, hurling their locked bodies against the solidarity of the bulkhead. For a moment Van's wind left him as he was precipitated into the unyielding metal. For an instant his grip upon the other's wrist relaxed.

The throat grip grew tighter, Van's head swam. It was as if a hundred electric wires were at white heat within his brain. He gasped, choked for breath.

Both his fists clenched and flailed madly against Garner's face. Again and again he crashed blow after blow into the bleeding countenance of his adversary.

Garner's grip loosened once more. Van flung his left arm about the

man's body, then rose to his feet, dragging the other with him. For a single second they stood erect, staring into each other's eyes.

Then Van's right hand swung through the air in a tremendous blow. It landed flush on the point of the killer's jaw. Garner's head snapped back as if his neck were broken. He staggered backward, and fell like a plummet. His head crashed against the bulkhead as he hit the deck. In an instant Van was standing over him, ready to deliver another blow should he rise again.

But Garner remained still and inert. An ugly gash was in the man's head and blood ran in a crazy stream along the deck. Van dropped to one knee. His hand touched the other's pulse. He dropped it and forced one of the eyelids open. Then he rose, frowning.

Garner was quite dead. His neck had been broken as it struck the bulkhead.

For a long moment Van stood there. His brow was wrinkled in thought. His face was hard and grim. Then, swiftly, he came to a decision.

From a secret pocket he withdrew a small rubber bag. Ripping it open, he extracted his make-up materials. Then, again dropping to his knees, he fixed his gaze upon the dead man's countenance.

DEXTEROUSLY, his fingers manipulated the pencils of grease-paint over his own face. Miraculously his complexion changed color. Two deft streaks of black at the base of his eyes gave them a narrower expression.

Small pieces of flesh-colored wax inserted in the nostrils flattened his nose, distended it.

Then, after some five minutes' work, he came to his feet again. He stowed away his waterproof bag,

and examined his face in a small mirror which hung on the wall.

His keen, exacting eyes saw no flaw in the disguise. His face was no longer that of the bearded monster's prisoner, the face of Francis Thorpe. Instead, it was the countenance of Garner, the guard.

The Phantom crossed the cabin and retrieved the knife which the dead man had thrown at him. This he dropped into his pocket, after he had swiftly exchanged clothing with the other. Then he turned to the door of the cabin and opened it.

NONCHALANTLY he stepped into the passageway without, and coolly climbed the companionway to the deck. There, he made his way easily toward the cabin amidships where he had left the bearded killer.

As he strode along the port side of the craft, his eye suddenly perceived something white and moving, close in to the Long Island shore. For a moment he hesitated and stared at it, essaying to bring its outlines more clearly into view.

Then, slowly, his piercing eyes made out the trim, graceful lines of a seaplane anchored in the Sound. He made a mental note of its position. Should anything occur to disclose his duplicity to the bearded killer, there was an excellent way out.

He was confident of his ability to outswim any member of the crew. In case of emergency he knew that he could make the plane before the others. And, once there, escape would be easy.

A large part of the Phantom's success was directly attributable to the fact that he was invariably ready for any emergency. What his keen eye saw, his equally keen mind retained.

Now he quickened his pace again and continued toward the stateroom of the killer.

CHAPTER XIII

NOCTURNAL VISIT



FEW moments later the Phantom entered the cabin amidships, where he had left the bearded killer and his other gunmen. He noted now that the single thug who had taken him out had been joined by two more henchmen of the killer.

Van slammed the door behind him and took up his position in the same chair that Garner had occupied before. The giant with the beard stood at the head of a small table in the center of the room. He shot an irritated glance at Van as he entered.

"Well," he snapped, "is he gone?"

Van grinned the evil, distorted grin that he had observed upon the face of Garner.

"He's gone, all right."

The bearded monster nodded.

"You took long enough," he said in a surly voice.

To this rebuke Van made no reply. He remained slouched in his seat, apparently paying little attention to whatever might occur in the room, although in actuality he was tense, alert.

The bearded killer turned to his auditors. He cleared his throat and spoke in his rasping voice.

"Tomorrow night will see the end of all this," he announced. "It is then that I shall achieve the ultimate goal. You who have served me faithfully shall have your reward at that time."

He paused and shot a swift glance around the room at his mercenaries.

"Garner, you and Rolph shall be responsible for this: I want all our men stationed outside the Thorpe house tomorrow. I may need them. If so, I shall give you the signal. You will deploy your men at about ten o'clock. You will keep them

there until you receive further orders from me."

Again his black, snapping eyes cast themselves about the cabin.

"Is that understood?"

A murmur of assent swept the room. It seemed to Van that the killers were relieved now that the end of their grim business was in sight, now that the promised reward was close at hand.

As for himself, he was aware of a flaming excitement within him. The weird tangle of clues and knotted threads to the mystery were slowly becoming unraveled in his mind. The knowledge that the enemy was to strike, once and for all, tomorrow, brought the moment of the showdown ever nearer. And that was a moment for which Van had been waiting impatiently for some time.

He looked up as the bearded murderer spoke once again.

"I have work to perform tonight. I shall do it alone, however. All of you remain here. When I return, the boat will cast off. I do not want it here in daylight. The police might observe it from the shore and make inquiries. Save the crew, who must await my return, the others of you may retire."

HE stalked through the cabin door. On the threshold he paused and shot four words over his shoulder at them:

"Don't forget tomorrow night!"

Van grunted as casual an assent as did the others. Then the man called Rolph rose and yawned.

"Well," he said, stretching, "I guess I'll go to bed. It sounds like a tough night tomorrow."

Van nodded. He said nothing, but he reflected that it sounded like a tough night for the Phantom right then. He knew that the bearded monster was prepared to stalk forth this very evening on some lethal

foray; he knew further that he, Van, would be compelled to follow the other.

IT was quite dark out on the deck as the bearded giant slowly climbed down the Jacob's ladder at the ship's side. Van, his body merging with the shadows of the midship ventilator, watched the huge body of the killer disappear below the ship's rail.

Bobbing on the surface of the dark water floated a small speedboat. It was into this that the giant climbed. Van heard the mighty engine leap to life. The craft spurred forward, leaving a silver trail in its wake. It headed, Van noted, due north.

Scarcely waiting until it was out of sight, Van raced to the rail, hurled himself over it into the water. A moment later, strong, powerful strokes of his arm were pulling him toward shore. He emerged at last from the water, stood on the beach for a moment taking his bearings.

About three-quarters of a mile to his left loomed the Thorpe mansion. But for the evening, at least, Van knew that the place was safe. The speedboat containing the killer had not headed that way. On the contrary, it was in the direction of the Westchester branch of the family that the bearded man had traveled.

About a half mile to his right, Van saw the flickering lights of a town. That would be Segrām, he thought. He plodded up the beach as fast as he could. He must gain the village, commandeer a car that would get him to Westchester in a hurry. Already the killer had a good fifteen minute start.

Then, of a sudden, he stopped dead in his tracks. To his left he caught sight of a small jetty which jutted down into the Sound. At its side something resembling a huge grey

bat loomed indistinctly in the darkness.

Van abruptly abandoned his idea of reaching Segrām. Instead, he turned toward the seaplane and with hasty steps made his way to the jetty.

He sprang to the pilot's seat of the ship. His hand switched on the ignition. With a reverberating beat the motor roared to life. Slowly he revved her. Then he gave her the gun.

The two pontoons cut foamy trails through the water. He drew the stick back slightly, and the seaplane thrust her nose into the air. Her propeller beat mightily as she took to the heavens.

The night wind beat against Van's face. Through the blackness of the evening he hurled the ship. There was little to guide him, to show him the course.

Straight north he went.

Once he leaned over the side of the office and stared down at the dark water below. His eyes narrowed as he saw something white, like a streak of moonlight, in the Sound underneath him.

That, in all probability, was the killer's speedboat. Van jerked back the stick and zoomed. Now the silver trail of the boat would be his beacon.

OF a sudden the streak which he followed took an abrupt left turn into the shore. Van watched it carefully, and a moment later brought the ship down gracefully upon the choppy waters below.

A few minutes after landing he scrambled up the beach at the rear of the Thorpe house and made his way through the garden to the grim old mansion.

Cautiously, he skirted the place. Then, suddenly, he saw a yellow oblong framed by the window where lights had just been turned on.

Swiftly, yet cautiously, the Phantom made his way across the garden to the light.

A balcony ran outside the window. The vine which covered the walls of the house made purchase easy. In an instant Van, crouched low so that his head would not be visible above the sill to those in the room, had gained his objective. Less than a foot above his head, the window was opened about six inches. A vague mumble of voices floated to his ears.

Then, slowly, he lifted his head. His eyes were on a level with the sill. They peered into the large bedroom within.

Sitting up in bed, staring in wild-eyed fear at the bearded apparition who confronted him, was Charles Thorpe. Fear, tempered by a wave of indignation, blazed from his eyes. At the foot of the bed, the giant, a mocking grin half hidden by the beard, gazed sardonically at the older man.

"Confound it all, Laval," Thorpe was saying, "granting you did get a rotten deal in the old days, what of it? Must you kill us all?"

The bearded man laughed mirthlessly.

"Unless I get what I ask," he said harshly.

FOR a long moment their gazes clashed. Then anger consumed Charles.

"Blast you," he said, "you'll not get it from me. I refuse to be a party to the thing. I'll tell the police everything I know in the morning. I'll—"

"Perhaps," said the giant softly, and there was a sinister threat in his voice, "perhaps you won't be able to talk in the morning."

He moved swiftly toward the door. Charles' eyes were riveted upon the revolver in his hand. The bearded giant intercepting the gaze,

read it aright, then laughed again.

"It is not of that you need be afraid," he said.

His left hand dropped to the pocket of his coat. Something small and black appeared in his fingers. The fingers moved swiftly, almost imperceptibly.

Then, with a soft laugh, he pulled the door open and disappeared through it.

HIS footfalls had not yet died away down the hall when Van, without waiting an instant, vaulted the window sill.

Charles stared in amazement as his second nocturnal visitor sprang into the room.

But Van wasted no time in explanations. His eyes, keen and searching, scrutinized the bed swiftly. Then he uttered a smothered exclamation as he saw what he searched for.

He seized the blanket in his hand and shook it violently. Then he lifted his foot and stamped it down hard upon the floor. Charles, still staring in amazement, looked down, then up again, curious inquiry in his eyes.

"What's that?" he stammered. "Who are you?"

Van Loan smiled grimly.

"That," he said, staring down at the floor, "was death. Who I am does not matter now."

Already in the distance he heard the killer's pounding footsteps making for the shore. Van realized that he must stick to the other's trail. Perhaps the Westchester house was not the only place that the murdering Laval had planned to visit this night.

The Phantom wasted no time in explaining, to the amazed Charles who he was, what he was doing there.

Instead, he turned and sprang again through the window, exiting

as suddenly, as mysteriously, as he had come.

CHAPTER XIV

DEATH STALKS



SWIFTLY he raced through the garden toward the shore. Before him he perceived the tall black silhouette of the man he sought. The latter hesitated, his gaze sweeping the shore. It seemed as if he could not, for the moment, find his boat. Then he moved ahead at a run.

Van suddenly heard a thrashing of the brush, a thud, then an oath. The bearded giant had tripped and fallen.

The Phantom seized this opportunity to skirt around him, a maneuver which placed him between the shore and the murderer. Then Van spotted, some few yards to the south of the seaplane, the anchored speedboat of the other.

An idea entered his head, and he acted on it immediately. Swiftly he waded into the water. In an instant he had reached the powerful craft. He dragged himself over the side and entered its covered rear cockpit.

There he crouched, silent and unmoving, as the giant entered the craft. Van realized that he was safe in his hiding place. In order to get from one cockpit to the other the bearded one would be compelled to leave the controls. That was unlikely. This, Van reflected, was a better mode of transportation than the seaplane. Here he was actually on the other's tail all the time. Not a movement of the monster could he miss.

He smiled quietly to himself. His hand fell upon the reassuring hilt of the knife which he had taken from the real Garner. He relaxed comfortably.

The boat vibrated as the engine started. Her bow sliced through the water. She picked up speed, and in a minute was racing south at full tilt.

Through the night they went, the two men who had sworn to extinguish each other. Van, smiling with quiet satisfaction, sat easily in the stern cockpit. In the front the bearded killer stared out on the Sound as his hands tightly gripped the wheel. In his eyes there was a gleam of triumph. His hairy lips were parted; and the blood surged warm in his veins despite the coolness of the night wind.

For the monster of Thorpe Manor was about to claim the bloody reward for which he had worked so long, so hard. Within twenty-four hours he would have disposed of all the Thorpes, would have wiped them from the earth, would have garnered at last the wealth which he had so coveted for himself.

His smile grew broader. He recalled what Charles Thorpe had said to him that night. He recalled what Jim Thorpe had said the night he died. They had called him Laval.

And that made his plan perfect. Laval, eh? Well, if he lived, Laval well might bear the brunt of the evil the bearded giant had wrought.

SUDDENLY he put the helm hard aport. The bow slithered over toward the shore. In the distance he could see a pinpoint of light shining from the mast of his own boat. He cut the motor and the speedboat glided silently, like a ghost ship, to a wharf which jutted out into the water.

Swiftly he made the craft fast. Then, with the agility that was so amazing in one of his bulk, he sprang from the vessel and raced into the darkness of the shore.

The Phantom was not far behind him. No sooner had the other dis-

appeared in the gloom, than Van Loan clambered onto the dock and was on his heels in silent pursuit.

Cautiously, they made their way through the night, pursuer and pursued. Once, Van nearly lost his quarry; but then he saw, silhouetted against the beam of a vagrant star, the huge bulk of the killer once more.

Van's hand was clasped about the knife hilt in his pocket. He realized now that the other was slowly making his way toward the ground upon which the Thorpe mansion stood. Perhaps the monster was about to strike again tonight.

Silent, unseen, Death stalked through the woods; and close behind the fleshless figure came the Phantom. Of a sudden, the giant killer emerged into a clearing. Something greyish-white loomed in the night before him. Van Loan, crouching behind a tree, stared at it for a moment; then, as his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, he made it out.

It was a statue erected to the founder of the Thorpe fortune. It had been placed on the estate, though some distance from the house proper. It stood in an isolated clearing, rising grim and forbidding as had been the man whose likeness it was.

THE Phantom's keen, alert eyes peered into the gloom of the night, closely watching his quarry. However, he was in no wise puzzled by the other's actions. The final thread in this enigma was becoming unraveled. For the first time a clear light illumined the murkiness which surrounded the grim trail of tragedy he had followed.

The bearded monster stretched forth his metallic hand. A vagrant moonbeam glittered coldly on the steel. With fingers that moved sharply, he touched the foot of the

statue. Then he took a swift pace backward.

Van Loan's eyes narrowed as he watched the phenomenon he had expected to take place before his gaze. The granite slab at the base of the statue swung slowly open. The bearded giant cast a surreptitious glance about him. Then, bending his incredible bulk to an even more incredible compactness, he vanished through the stone portal which led to—where?

But the Phantom was certain that he now knew the answer to this, as well as to the hundred other questions which had been evolved by the unholy activities of the killer.

He hesitated no longer. Swiftly, silently, he emerged from his arboreal cover. He made his way across the clearing, touched the secret spring; and a moment later had followed the monster into the dark tunnel beneath the statue.

IT was significant that his hand remained on the hilt of the knife as he stalked the bearded terror through the black labyrinth beneath the earth.

He could not see. The tunnel was darker than the night outside; darker and more ominous. He felt, instinctively rather than by reason, that there was something evil in this subterranean corridor. A thick musty smell came to his nostrils, an odor redolent of unclean death. He felt suddenly that he had smelled this smell before.

Slowly he worked his way through the tortuously winding passageway. His fingers scraped the sharp, stony walls. Blood streaked down his hand. Then, of a sudden, it came to him that this unholy odor was the same that had emanated from the fake Phantom's small box which he had discovered in the beginning of the case.

Now he knew his instinctive

warning of danger was confirmed. His grip on the knife tightened almost imperceptibly.

Before him, some ten yards down the corridor, a beam of light hurled itself at the darkness. Van Loan stopped dead and crouched against the damp wall. However, a moment's breathless observation revealed that the flashlight was not aimed in his direction.

The giant was kneeling over a dark, rectangular object on the floor of the passageway. The flashlight was held in his left hand, while his right moved in a strange, inexplicable gesture.

CAUTIOUSLY, silently the Phantom moved closer to the crouching man. Now, in the glare of the flashlight, he could plainly see what the giant's right hand was doing.

The steel digits were carefully dropping tiny black objects into a glass-covered box. Van Loan frowned. His brow corrugated in surprise. Then he smiled quietly as the surprise evolved to lucid understanding.

For the objects which the bearded giant dropped into that hellish receptacle were flies—dead flies!

Abruptly the flashlight was extinguished. Van heard the thumping footsteps of the giant coming up the passageway toward him. Hastily he turned. He sped up the tunnel, seeking to reach its exit before the killer discovered his presence.

A loose stone rolled like a marble beneath his foot. He was flung violently off balance. The leather of his shoe scuffed the rocky floor.

The flashlight leaped to life. A harsh voice cried out:

"Stop! Who's there? Stop, or I'll fire!"

But Van Loan did not stop. On the contrary, he increased the speed and ran with every ounce of his

strength through the winding stone corridor. A reverberating report shattered the air behind him. The sound of the shot echoed and re-echoed, continuing to whine through the confined space of the tunnel.

Van Loan heard the clanging ricochet of the bullet as it hit the stone floor. Still he did not decrease his pace. Like a madman he raced through the blackness.

He knew full well that should the other overtake him, should the hire-sute killer achieve a fair shot at him, it would be the end. Armed only with the knife he had purloined from Garner, he could not hope to overpower the bearded madman who held a .38 in his cruel steel fingers.

Breathless, he arrived at the adit. Without slackening his pace he bent over almost double and passed through the narrow aperture at the statue's base. Once again he emerged into the night.

Like a deer he bounded across the clearing and disappeared into the foliage which surrounded it. From the sanctuary afforded by the woods, he heard the other stamp heavily out of the tunnel.

For a moment the bearded monster stood there, revolver in hand, glaring about him. Then, after a moment of fruitless optical searching, he pivoted on his heel and made his way back toward the boat.

CAREFULLY the Phantom followed the killer down to the wharf. Van remained concealed at one end of the jetty until he heard the powerful throb of the speedboat's engine.

Then he divested himself of his coat and shoes and dropped silently into the choppy water.

He swam with powerful strokes, utilizing every ounce of his strength to gain speed. He remembered the bearded one's orders regarding the movement of the cabin cruiser upon

his own return. To complete what he must do, it was imperative that the Phantom arrive before the craft weighed anchor.

The sound of the speedboat evanesced in the distance. In its wake Van Loan's muscular body cut the water.

Desperately he swam on.

He reached the white hulk of the cruiser even as he heard the rattle of the anchor chains at the bow. The water swirled about him as the vessel's screw churned the Sound.

His hands, almost numbed with cold, seized a line which hung from her starboard rail. He proceeded to pull himself up hand over hand until he gained the deck. He found himself amidships, on the deck outside the cabin where a scant three hours ago the bearded one had condemned him to death.

Up in the bow he was aware of movement of the crew. But there was no sign of life where he now stood.

He placed his ear to the door of the cabin. He heard nothing. His hand seized the knob, pushed open the door.

Peering through the crack, he discovered that there was no one in the room. Knife in hand, he entered.

In a far corner, high up on a shelf, two objects attracted his attention. One was a tremendous false beard, the other a pair of what appeared to be steel gloves.

HIS gaze dropped to the floor. There he beheld two blocks of wood, about a foot high, and some six inches in diameter. Attached to their tops were black leather thongs. This, then, had caused the elephant's spoor which had so puzzled the Phantom.

He crossed the room. Upon examination he discovered that the spikes numbered ten; that they were

steel talons. His gaze cast itself hollow inside and so fashioned as to fit over the fingers of a man.

He smiled quietly to himself. Then swiftly he picked up those cruel steel talons. His gaze cast itself about the room and came to rest upon a small tool chest under the cabin's settee.

This he opened and withdrew from it a pair of pliers. He worked swiftly and dexterously.

Then he replaced the steel fingers upon the shelf, returned the pliers to the box and approached a door at the forward end of the cabin.

SILENTLY his fingers turned the knob. His shoulder pressed against a panel. The door did not move. It was locked. Then the voice which by now had become quite familiar to Van sounded from behind the door.

"Who's that? Is it you, Garner?"

Van did not answer. Instead, he turned and strode swiftly from the room.

When he gained the deck he saw that the craft was shooting full speed ahead across the Sound.

His hands gripped the rail and with the quiet smile persisting on his lips he vaulted lightly into the sea.

He swam swiftly toward the Long Island shore; and despite the coldness of the water, despite the weary ache in his muscles, despite the fatigue that was upon him, a surging exultation was sweeping through his veins.

For the Phantom knew that he was fast approaching the end of the trail. There was but one more detail to which he must attend before he sprang the trap. And if the information which Havens' genealogist gave him corroborated his own theory, the battle was won, and the menace which had stalked the

Thorpe mansion would be at last brought to its doom.

CHAPTER XV

INTERLUDE



LATE afternoon had arrived. The sun dipped down toward the horizon far over to the west of the Sound. A placid calm was on the water, unruffled by the light breeze wafted across the bay. An alien tranquillity seemed to envelop the Thorpe mansion. A strange peace seemed to have cast its blessing upon that house of death.

Within the grim old walls of the house, high up in the organ room, sat two people. They were young and they sat close together, propinquity and romance holding them. Doctor Hamilton's arm rested about the shoulders of Doris Thorpe. The young man bent forward and gazed deeply into the girl's eyes.

"Please, Doris," he said, "let's go away. Let's get married and leave this house of hell."

Her eyes stared into his. There was no denial in them, yet with her lips she demurred.

"But I don't like to run away," she said. "Let us wait until this thing has been cleared up."

Hamilton made a gesture of despair.

"But will it ever be cleared up," he said. "How can we bank on that? The killer has never left a clue behind him yet. Even with the Phantom on the trail, we can make no headway."

"But if we could only find out what it was that Jim feared so much," she said. "Then perhaps—"

Hamilton cut her short.

"What Jim feared has nothing to do with this," he said. "If the Phantom is playing that angle he's wrong, thoroughly and completely wrong."

Doris' eyes clouded. A faint frown came over her white brow.

"You have made that statement before," she said. "What do you mean? How can you know. Oh, Graham, what is it that you seem to know about this? Please, tell me!"

For a moment he regarded her with pain in his eyes. Then he said:

"Doris, you don't think that I'm mixed up in these murders, do you?"

She shook her head.

"Of course not, dear. But you're so mysterious. You know something we don't know. You know something that even the Phantom doesn't know."

A soft footfall sounded behind them. A quiet voice spoke.

"You are wrong there, Miss Thorpe. The thing that Doctor Hamilton knows is known to the Phantom also."

Startled, they both turned. They stared, astonished, into the humorous eyes of a tall, well-built man who wore a black silk mask over the upper half of his face. An amused smile spread itself over Van's features as he remarked the consternation he had caused.

"The Phantom!" ejaculated Hamilton. "But how did you get here? I heard no ring from the gate. The dogs weren't drawn in. I'd even swear that you didn't come up the stairway into this room."

"And in that," said Van gravely, "you would be right."

DORIS' blue eyes gazed up at him from beneath a furrowed brow.

"But," she began. "How—what—?"

Van's smile grew broader.

"When the bearded killer visits this house," he said evenly, "there is no ring from the gate either. The dogs are not drawn in. You could swear he does not come up the stairs into this room."

A light showed on Hamilton's face. Excitedly, he rose from his seat.

"You mean that you've discovered

how the killer gets in and out of the house?"

Van eyed him solemnly.

"I've discovered a lot of things, Doctor," he said gravely. "Have you ever heard of a Colonel Laval?"

Hamilton's eyes were suddenly dilated. His face grew pale. His mouth opened but it was a long moment before he spoke. Then his words crackled with vehement emphasis.

"He has nothing to do with this," he cried. "I knew that this would happen. But he's innocent, I tell you. I know he's innocent."

A footfall sounded on the stairway. Harker appeared in the room. He held an envelope in his hand which he tendered to Doris.

"This was in the mailbox outside the gate, Miss," he said.

Doris' slim finger ripped the envelope open. Her eyes perused the words. Van's keen gaze had noted that no stamp was affixed to the letter. Now he spoke.

"Undoubtedly another missive from your anonymous friend, the man from Montana, Miss Thorpe?"

Doris looked up swiftly. Hamilton breathed hard.

"Let me see that note," he said rapidly.

The girl handed it to him. He read it aloud:

I shall be with you tonight—Do not fear.
Signed: The Man from Montana.

Doris stared at him in bewilderment.

"But what does it mean? Who is the man from Montana?"

VAN smiled. He put a hand on Hamilton's shoulder.

"Shall you be glad to see him, Doctor?" he murmured.

Hamilton glared at him.

"You're wrong, I tell you," he stormed. "You're wrong!"

Van smiled again, but he did not answer. Instead, he turned to Doris.

"Have you any idea where you were taken the night you disappeared from the house? Do you know how you got into Francis' trunk?"

She shook her head.

"I was drugged," she said. "Some one forced a handkerchief over my nose as I was dozing. I did not regain consciousness until I was taken to the captain's room on the *Renault*. I did not even know where Murray had found me."

Van nodded slowly. He seemed preoccupied with an idea. It was as if he had scarcely listened to the girl's words.

"LISTEN," he said quietly. "When I came into this room a few minutes ago, I could not avoid overhearing some of the conversation. I take it, Hamilton, that you want to marry Miss Thorpe?"

Hamilton met his gaze squarely.

"I do."

With a smile on his face Van turned to Doris.

"And you?" he asked.

She nodded her head.

"I love him," she said simply.

"Good," said Van. "Then listen to me. Tonight, you two shall be married. I'll make arrangements for a minister. Set the ceremony for about midnight; that will give you time, Miss Thorpe, to make whatever preparation you may desire to. If by that time the mystery of the Thorpe curse has not been cleared up, I advise you, Hamilton, to take Miss Thorpe on a honeymoon, a long honeymoon, away from the menace that stalks this house."

Hamilton turned to Doris, remarking, "Well?"

A great warmth shone from her eyes as she looked at him. She nodded her head.

"Of course," she said. "Let's get married at once. Take me away from this house, Graham."

Hamilton put his arms about her;

over his shoulder he spoke to Van.
 "Do you really expect to clear this thing up by tonight?"

Van nodded grimly. "I do," he said.
 "And with luck, I shall."

CHAPTER XVI

THE MURDERER UNMASKED



MIDNIGHT. A cold argent moon hung pendant in the sky. Below, her wan face was reflected in the rippling waters of the Sound. A scattered handful of stars adorned the moon and the firmament.

Darkness cloaked the land. The gloomy towers of the Thorpe mansion thrust themselves into the sky. Without, the savage dogs chained to the interior of the grim wall which encircled the house bayed dolefully. Beyond the walls dark shadows moved back and forth. A score of men merged their bodies with the trees and foliage, skulking in the night like the killers they were.

For tonight the curse of the tribe was close upon the Thorpes, ready to strike with its bloody hand at the happiness which was the goal of the youngest member of the family.

Within the house the Thorpes were gathered. The three that still lived in the Westchester abode of the family—Charles, Doone and Prudence—were there. Murray, white-faced, nervous, vowing that when this ceremony was done, he would flee the country. Florence, composed and calm, but with a flickering fear apparent in her eyes. Wayman, the family lawyer, terse, businesslike and obviously bewildered by the crazy events which had no place in his own prosaic conception of things.

Young Doctor Hamilton, radiant with incipient happiness, yet wearing an anxious air beneath that very radiance. Doris, wan and excited, but with joy beating in her heart.

In the drawing room a minister waited, book in hand, to perform the ceremony. Harker, the butler, stood at his side, obviously uneasy in the presence of a man of the cloth.

Close by the stairs which led to the organ room where the ceremony was to take place, two men stood. One was Inspector Crowley, the other the Phantom. The latter still wore his black silk mask. He was clad in immaculate evening clothes, so well tailored that not even the bulk of the automatic at his hip showed in their drape.

As the family slowly assembled, Van leaned close to Crowley. He spoke one word in the inspector's ear. "Well?"

Crowley nodded.

"It's all fixed," he answered. "Half a dozen speedboats on the Sound, loaded with men. More men on the main road, to be summoned with rockets if we need them."

The Phantom nodded.

Now Doris and the doctor came into the room. Van stepped forward.

"We all seem to be ready. Shall we go to the organ room? Your organist is there, I believe?"

He addressed this last remark to the minister. The grey-haired man replied in the affirmative. Then slowly, the little procession moved toward the stairs that led to the room above.

AS they began their journey, the mighty peals of the organ, which had remained silent since the death of the founder of the Thorpe fortunes had run his avid fingers over the keys, boomed forth with the ever new strains of the Wedding March.

Slowly the cavalcade proceeded. They entered the room. It was a long and gloomy chamber, now brightened by hastily ordered flowers. As the procession followed the minister to the far end of the room,

where the organist ran his slim finger across the yellowed keys, Van Loan was peculiarly aware of a premonition of danger.

His mind and muscles became suddenly alert. True, there was neither a tangible nor logical reason for his tenseness. Rather it was some sixth sense, some psychic force within him which proximity with death had cultivated, that caused a warning bell to ring deep within his consciousness.

AT the side of a raised dais near the organ, a tremendous wreath of orange blossoms hung. Hamilton had ordered them earlier in the day for his young bride. As they approached the end of the room, the doctor reached out and lifted them from their resting place. He proffered them to Doris.

Her slim hand reached out, took them.

She smiled an affectionate thanks at her lover.

It was then that the thing, which thus far had merely been an instinctive premonition of evil in the Phantom's mind, became a swift and perilous actuality. A flashing light crashed into his consciousness.

As though actuated by some electric force, he sprang forward. His hand smashed down on that of Doris, hard and swift. She uttered a startled cry of alarm. The shattered wreath of orange flowers fell to the floor, the fragile petals scattered in the dust.

Roughly Van thrust the girl to one side. He stepped forward. His right foot lifted, smashed down on the floor. He repeated the process. And each time that he lifted his foot there was revealed beneath his shoe a crushed black body, a mashed multi-legged insect.

Now his keen eyes saw yet a third black, crawling thing hastily creeping across the floor to the black

sanctuary beneath the organ. Like a springing tiger Van was after it. For the third time his foot came crashing down to the floor, crushing the life out of the horrible prehensile thing that had brought its filthy death to the holiness of the marriage chamber.

A gasp of amazed bewilderment reached through the room. Then Crowley spoke.

"Good God, man, what's wrong?"

But before Van could answer, there came the rushing of heavy feet upon the stairs.

A voice cried out: "Good heavens! Am I in time?"

The entire assemblage turned their heads. Every eye in the room stared at the tall, bluff, grey-haired man who panted at the head of the stairs. Hamilton moved from Doris' side and, crossing the room, clasped the newcomer's hand heartily.

A dazed silence still held the room. No word was spoken. Then the Phantom's clear accents cut the spell.

"Good evening," he said calmly. "The Man from Montana has arrived!"

IT was Wayman who spoke next. "And who," he inquired, "is the man from Montana?"

By now, Hamilton had his arm about Doris. His other arm was linked in that of the stranger. The grey-haired man turned and faced the audience as if to make reply. But it was the Phantom who answered Wayman's question.

"The man from Montana," he said, "is Colonel John Laval. Have you ever heard the name, Wayman?"

Wayman's eyes narrowed. He shook his head abruptly. Laval now stared at Van Loan.

"And who are you?" he asked. "What do you know of me?"

Van smiled easily.

"I am called the Phantom," he said, "and I know a great deal of

you, Laval. You come from Montana. You are not the only thing in this room from that state."

Crowley frowned, took a step forward.

"What's it all about?" he growled.

"The other thing in this room from that state," went on Van Loan, ignoring the interruption, "lies there."

Dramatically, he indicated the crushed bodies of the insects on the floor.

All eyes stared down at the black, rended bodies.

Laval took a deep breath and stepped forward.

"So you know," he said in a grave tone.

Van nodded. "I know this much," he said. "I know what caused the deaths in the Thorpe family. It was the bite of the Black Widow, the poisonous spider hailing from Montana and Idaho. I saw the Killer feeding some of them in his secret tunnel last night. That passageway, by the way, gives onto the little room upstairs."

Laval moistened his lips. A heavy silence reigned over them all. Doris hardly dared breathe. It was as if the illuminating intelligence of the Phantom was about to shine through the dark shadow surrounding the cursed family.

"Well," said Laval, "and what else do you know?"

"I KNOW," went on Van, "as a result of the researches of a very fine genealogist in New York, that many years ago Samuel Thorpe, the founder of the family fortunes, was your partner. I know that he swindled you out of your rightful share of his wealth.

"I also know that it was barefaced robbery—a thing which you could have prevented had you the money with which to fight him. But you did not have it."

Hamilton pushed forward. His eyes blazed into those of the Phantom.

"You're wrong, confound you," he said. "You're—"

Crowley seized the younger man by the arm and held him back. The Phantom continued imperturbably with his recital.

"You swore that you would be revenged upon Thorpe. You cursed him and told him his whole family would suffer; that you would have his money before you died. That you would make enough money of your own to enable you to fight him. In fact, you also threatened him with death. Am I right?"

L AVAL'S face was white. Slowly he nodded his head.

"You are right," he said slowly. "But—"

Crowley whistled in amazement.

"Nice work," he said to Van.

"Though how you found this out is beyond me. So this is the killer." He advanced upon Laval threateningly, menacingly.

"Is it?" said Van blandly. "I think not, Crowley. Laval arrived from Montana tonight. He can prove a perfect alibi. No, Crowley, Laval killed no one."

Young Hamilton sighed with relief. Color flooded back into his face.

The inspector frowned.

"Then what the devil were you talking about?" he demanded.

"Black Widows," said Van casually. "And death—and the curse that was on the Thorpes."

"You're right," said Laval. "I killed no one. True, I had vowed vengeance on Sam Thorpe and his heirs. But that was years ago, a vow sworn in the heat of youth. Age has mellowed me. I forgave, I forgot. Sam had been my friend. I wanted to resume that friendship. Then he died."

"Yes," nodded Van. "But you had no objection to gaining half of Sam's fortune in a legitimate way, had you?"

Laval colored. He did not reply.

"Come," said Crowley impatiently. "If you've got an answer, Phantom, give it to us."

"All right. I, too, once believed that Laval had killed the Thorpes. But I found it was untrue. I knew it the night that Francis Thorpe was found dead with an M upon his shirt-front. You remember that, Crowley?"

The inspector nodded.

"In death, Francis Thorpe essayed to name the murderer. He wrote a single initial in his own blood. What was that initial, Crowley?"

"M."

"True. As it happens, there is a Thorpe whose name begins with that initial."

The Phantom stared at Murray. Crowley's eyes followed the Phantom's gaze.

"So," snapped the inspector, "that is it. Trying to get the entire fortune for himself. M, for Murray. That's what Francis meant!"

Van shook his head.

"You're wrong again, Inspector," he said. "In fact, you were wrong a moment ago when you said that the letter upon Francis' shirtfront was an M. It was not."

Crowley reddened.

"You're crazy, man," he said. "I saw it myself."

"**Y**OU saw it. But it wasn't an M. Now, get this. Francis is lying on his back. His finger is covered with his own blood. He writes a single letter.

"Looking down at his own shirt-front, he writes that letter normally, as anyone would write. But when we saw it, Crowley, *we read it upside down!*

"We read that single damning let-

ter standing at Francis' feet. Francis wrote it the other way. It was not an M!"

Crowley's brow wrinkled as he grappled with this.

Every person in the room considered the Phantom's words. Van Loan spoke softly.

"It was not an M, Crowley," he repeated softly. "It was a W."

"W." The syllables were repeated, framed by nearly every pair of lips in the room. The Phantom took a step forward. His hand was at his pocket.

"Yes," he said rapidly, "W! W for Wayman! The bearded killer who planned to murder off all the Thorpe family, except Florence. He intended to marry her, thus clinching all the wealth of the family. Look!"

HIS left hand shot out and seized the lawyer's wrist. In a vise-like grip he held the other's fingers up to the light. At the base of each digit was a thin circular line, as if the lawyer had been wearing four tight rings.

"Those marks," said Van hastily, clearly, "were caused by the steel fingers he donned for strangling purposes. I tightened them at the base last night, tightened them so that they would leave a mark on their wearer's fingers. There's your last bit of evidence, Crowley!"

The inspector stepped forward. Wayman jerked his hand from the Phantom's grasp, and muttered a frightful oath. In the tense moment of drama, no one noticed that Florence Thorpe had slowly moved toward the light switch at the stair-head.

Now her slim finger moved, touched the switch. Her voice ripped through the darkness before anyone could move.

"Simon! Quick, make your getaway!"

Like a wraith Wayman insinuated

himself through the crowded room. Like a madman he raced toward the narrow iron staircase!

CHAPTER XVII

GAUNTLET OF STEEL



ROUGHLY Crowley pushed Florence aside. His fingers groped for and found the light switch. In another instant the room was once again flooded with light.

The Phantom looked up in time to see the fleeing legs of Wayman disappearing up the iron staircase. Then the killer evanesced from view. Van's .38 flashed from his hip pocket with the speed of light. The steel nose of the bullet clattered on the metal of the stairs.

Crowley dashed to the stairway and made as if to follow Wayman. But Van's shout stopped him.

"You won't get him that way. Leave it to me. Summon your men!"

The piercing shrill blast of a police whistle rent the room. From without, on the waters, an answering blast floated in through the open window. "Mass the men around the house," cried Van. "Wayman's thugs are out beyond the wall!"

He waited no longer, but went racing down the main stairway to the ground floor. Down the hall he rushed, through the foyer, across the veranda and into the garden.

The crazy wailing of the hungry hounds assailed his ears as he ran. Suddenly a low growl emanated from slavering jaws directly before him. A dark body hurled itself at his throat through the night.

Van slashed out viciously with his pistol muzzle. The metal of the barrel struck the dog on the jaw. With a whine of pain it fell back. Van continued his mad run without changing his pace.

Now he was at the gate. Behind him he heard alarms. The hounds,

disturbed at their fitful slumber, set up a terrific baying. The police boats which Crowley had planted out in the Sound roared in toward the shore, their motors singing a mighty, crescendo song of power, their sirens rending the silence of the night with hoarse shrills.

It was the work of an instant to unlock the gate. Out onto the path which ran from the house to the main road, the Phantom raced. He had scarcely left the estate proper when a swift stab of crimson ripped the darkness ahead of him and a whining slug sang its threnody past his head.

Without losing his stride, he brought the .38 up rapidly. His finger constricted upon the trigger. A slug hurtled through the blackness, roared through the night in the direction of the flash from the invisible enemy's gun.

From the rear, down near the shore where the officers were even now disembarking from the police boats, a yellow rocket shot into the air, lived its brief flaming life. Its illuminating rays put the ebony of the night to light; its gallant beam sent an unmistakable signal to Crowley's men who waited along the main road.

But Van neither slackened his pace nor turned his head. He was confident that the plans he had worked out with the inspector would not fail. He was grimly resolved, too, that Wayman should not escape him. He must gain the other entrance to the secret passageway before the steel-fingered killer emerged.

On he sped.

NOW, to the aid of his original attacker came comrades. A swift staccato barrage resounded leadenly through the trees.

The Phantom broke his stride for the first time. He deserted the main path and proceeded like a broken-

field runner through the trees, utilizing their sturdy trunks as cover.

As he sped from trunk to trunk, his own weapon was not silent. Its flaming muzzle directed itself at the point of the enemy's fire. Once a scream of a mortal in terrible agony lifted itself to heaven, attesting to the accuracy of Van Loan's aim.

Then of a sudden, the lethal hail which surrounded him as he ran diminished somewhat. A legato crackling sound rippled through the woods. Rifle fire from the police who closed in from the main road sang savagely through the night.

Overhead the moon gleamed coldly, casting light from a dead world upon those about to die.

But the thugs of Wayman did not die easily. They had been lured to this thing by gold. Their hands were red with the blood of the men they had already murdered. They knew they could expect but short shrift from justice. And this knowledge rendered them desperate.

They were lost in any event. Their sole and slim hope for salvation was to overcome their enemies at this moment.

Flares fired from police Very pistols lighted up the terrain with an eerie, ghastly light. And in that catoptric glare the dark bodies of men were seen weaving in and out of the tree lanes and brush. Men with small black metallic objects in their hands; and the expressions of cornered rats in their eyes. Men who fought for their lives there in the gloom.

THE Phantom had almost completed the gauntlet of steel which he had been running. Already blood dripped copiously from a wound in his left arm, where a bullet had ripped through the flesh.

Before him, in the half light that resembled the false dawn of the tropics, there loomed up the old

statue which he knew formed the exit from the tunnel leading to the Thorpe manor. Now he gained it. And not a moment too soon.

Even as he came up to its base he saw the stone at the bottom of the structure swing suddenly outward. Swiftly he leaped to one side. A shadowy figure emerged from the base of the statue. A shadowy figure whose face was obscured by an enveloping black beard.

Steel talons extended from his fingertips, and in his right hand was a revolver. Evidently the lawyer had resorted to his old disguise to get through the police cordon. Those steel claws would give him a tremendous advantage at close quarters.

NOW he passed within a scant two feet of the Phantom. Van's weapon came up. Its muzzle was on the other's body. "Stop," cried Van. "Put up your hands!"

Wayman obeyed. He put up his hands. But as his right hand moved through the air, he swung his gun up with it. A blinding explosion ripped out almost in Van's face. He was aware of a searing pain in his shoulder. A thousand devils of agony crawled down his arm.

Then, as if lusting to slay with his bare hands the man who had brought his ambitious perfidy to naught, Wayman closed in. His left hand, glittering artificially in the strange light, clawed at Van's face.

Four ugly crimson furrows showed on the sleuth's neck. Blood dripped on his collar.

Wayman's revolver suddenly lifted its muzzle once again. His metal digit wrapped itself about the trigger. But that gun was never fired.

The Phantom's own finger twitched rapidly. The striker of the .38 was released. At terrific speed it plunged forward, detonated the cartridge cap in the chamber.

The weapon jerked like a live

thing in Van's hand. Steel and flame were vomited from the barrel. A crashing slug smashed through the air, ripped into the breast of the monstrous killer, ate through his flesh, traveling a crimson trail into his black heart.

Wayman uttered a terrible gasping sound. His hands dropped impotently at his sides. He swayed forward like a sapling in a high wind. His knees crumpled as if they were disintegrating rubber. With a low, scarcely audible moan, he pitched forward full on his face at the feet of the man who had vanquished him.

WITH an odd, wry smile that had no mirth in it, the Phantom looked at him for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders and slowly retraced his footsteps toward the grim old house that stood on the edge of the water.

By now the police had closed in from both sides upon the minions of the man who already lay dead; who already was halfway to the inferno where a just God would suffer him to pay for the misdeeds he had committed on this earth.

A few moments later the Phantom re-entered the organ room. There the Thorpe family was gathered around something white and pallid that lay upon a couch near the dais.

Van elbowed his way through the crowd.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

It was Crowley who answered him.

"Florence," said the inspector, shortly. "She killed herself. Drank enough cyanide from a vial she had with her to kill a dozen men."

Van nodded.

"Get her downstairs, Crowley," he said.

The inspector gave the necessary orders to his men. Then he turned to Van.

"It's all over," he said. "But

there are still a few points to be cleared up."

Again Van nodded, and this time he turned to Laval.

"I think you can tell us a few things, sir," he said gravely. "That is, you and your son, here."

He indicated Doctor Hamilton. The others in the room stared in amazement.

Laval merely nodded. Then, after a short pause, he spoke.

"You're right," he admitted, "Doctor Hamilton is my son. Rather, my stepson. He met Doris Thorpe at a party some time ago, and fell in love with her. In order that he might be near her, I bought out the practice of the doctor he superseded here. Naturally, when he told me he wanted to marry her, I became greatly interested in her welfare."

"Yes," growled Crowley, "but why all these mysterious notes signed the man from Montana?"

"Because," said Laval, "I knew what was killing the Thorpes. I didn't know who, but I knew what. Black Widows are not common commodities. In fact, I believe I know the only man in the world who sells them. He's a scientist friend of mine in Butte.

"He told me of receiving orders for the insects from a box number in Long Island. That, in itself, was not so strange, perhaps, but when I read of Jim Thorpe's death and the strange symptoms, I realized what had killed him."

"So," said Van, "you sent those notes."

"EXACTLY. I knew I had to be careful; I knew that suspicion could well be thrown on me, because of the past. So I came in person to solve the mystery. Fortunately, you had it solved when I got here."

Crowley nodded. Then again he turned to Van.

"So far, so good," he said. "But

how did you tie Florence into this thing?"

"Wayman killed Laval's first emissary," said Van. "Tortured him to death because he wouldn't explain the meaning of the first note from the man from Montana. As a matter of fact, they were looking for the Phantom—Florence had overheard Doris phone Muriel Havens—when they got Laval's messenger."

"They took the note from him. I found it in Florence's possession. Florence, who started so, and clutched her pocket when the man from Montana was mentioned."

CROWLEY nodded. "And," he said "what of Doris in Francis' trunk? What of that?"

"Rather simple," said Van. "Wayman disliked performing more killings in the house, knowing I was there. When we thought he had gone home that night, he hid in the tunnel until he could reach Doris unmolested. Being the family lawyer, he had probably learned of its existence from old Thorpe, even though the old man had disclosed it to no one else."

"The kidnaping of Doris and planting her in her brother's trunk brought three Thorpes—Murray,

Francis and Doris—together, where Wayman could dispose of them all, if need be, without casting suspicion upon himself. It was good—but it didn't work."

"Well," said Crowley, "that about cleans it all up. But it's the most involved thing I ever got mixed up in."

A GREY-HAIRED man thrust himself unobtrusively into their midst.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "But I understood that I was called here to perform a marriage ceremony."

Van looked down at the flushed face of the minister, the quiet man of God who had just witnessed such startling things. He laughed lightly.

"So you were," he said. "Very well, then. Come, Doris, and you, Hamilton. Are you ready?"

The minister took up his place before the organ. The pale young man at the instrument dropped his fingers to the keys. For the second time that evening the soft strains of the Wedding March soared through the grim house, presaging, perhaps, a new era, a happier epoch in the lives of the Thorpes who at last were free of the curse of their sister which had been upon them.

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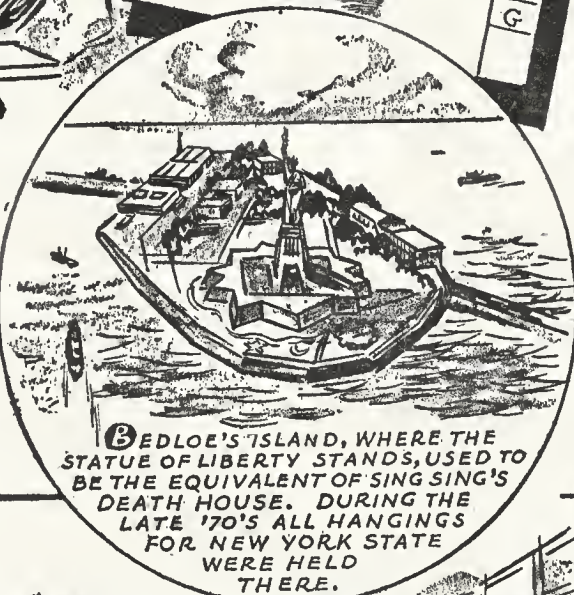


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FINGERTIP CLUES.

MANY CITIES OF THE U.S., IN ORDER TO KEEP UP WITH THE MODERN TREND IN IDENTIFICATION WORK, ARE INSTALLING THE NEW SINGLE PRINT SYSTEM - A METHOD OF CLASSIFYING OF SINGLE IMPRESSIONS SEPARATELY IN SUCH A WAY THAT THEY CAN BE READILY PRODUCED FOR COMPARISON WITH SINGLE MARKS AT SCENES OF CRIMES.

EVERY 24 HOURS IN THE U.S. THERE ARE 1,200 NEW CRIMINALS, PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN TO THE POLICE, FINGER PRINTED.

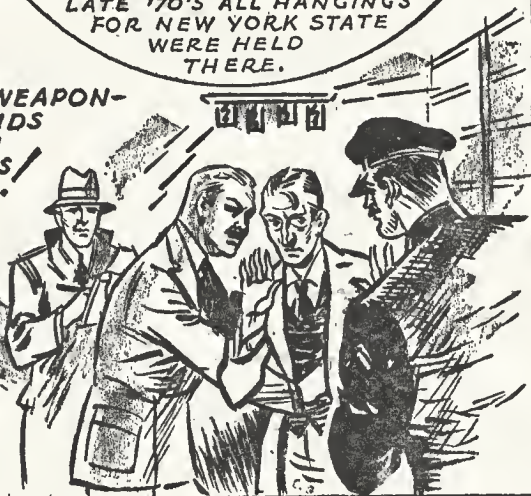


BEDLOE'S ISLAND, WHERE THE STATUE OF LIBERTY STANDS, USED TO BE THE EQUIVALENT OF SING SING'S DEATH HOUSE. DURING THE LATE '70'S ALL HANGINGS FOR NEW YORK STATE WERE HELD THERE.



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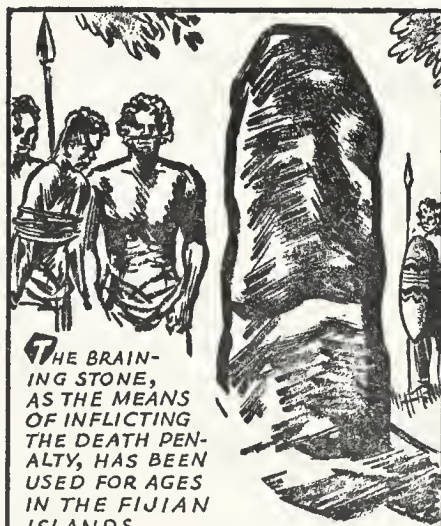




DETECTIVE GEORGE CORNISH-

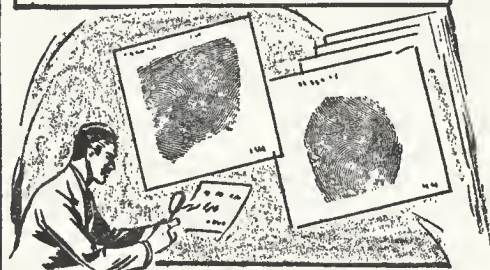
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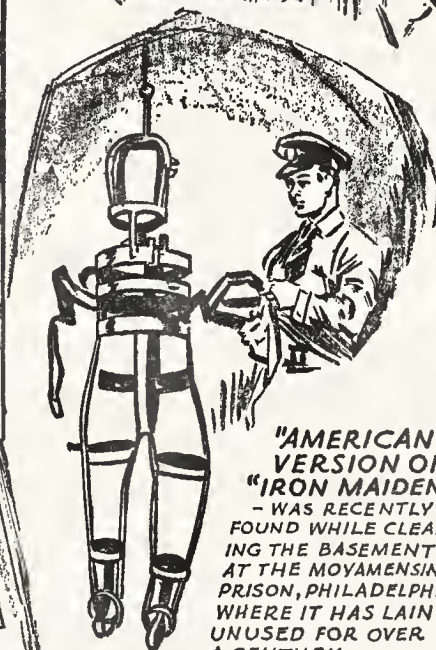


THE BRAIN-ING STONE, AS THE MEANS OF INFLECTING THE DEATH PENALTY, HAS BEEN USED FOR AGES IN THE FIJIAN ISLANDS.

THE CONDEMNED ARE SWUNG AGAINST THE STONE WITH SUCH FORCE AS TO CRUSH THEIR SKULLS.



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Masked Faces

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CHAPTER I

CLEAN HAUL

"YEAH, get 'em up and keep 'em up!"

The strident voice that called this command brought the orchestra to a sudden silence. The group of dancers hesitated, looked with awe into the muzzles of half a dozen sub-machine-guns and then gasped, a long audible cry of mingled fear and exasperation. Slowly they lined the walls under the guidance of those deadly guns and up went their hands.

In the east corner Burton Blayne was perspiring behind his heavy cardboard mask. All the guests were similarly masked and Blayne had to grin a little at the incongruity of it all. Three-score grown persons standing against the walls, hands upraised. Each face was a still mask, sheltering the fear that predominated the true features underneath.

It was a comic ball. Each mask represented features to create as much merriment as possible. Burton Blayne's was that of a narrow-faced man with a protruding, slight slanting nose and a large mouth.

"A fine bunch o' punks," the silk-masked leader of the hold-up men grinned. He laughed uproar-



He slid to the floor, his mask

iously as a giddily painted, doll-faced woman slithered to the floor with a cry.

"KEEP 'em up and nobody gets hurt," the leader grated. "The first guy—or dame too—that tries any funny stuff gets the business end o' one o' these gats. I'm going over each one o' you. Dames that don't want me to paw 'em better take off their pretty doodads, 'cause papa wants 'em all."

He started at one end of the line. Swiftly he searched the men, stuffing watches and bulging purses into a silken bag he had produced from his pocket.

Burton Blayne was fingering the



grinning merrily upward at the bandit

diamond ring on his fourth finger. It had been his mother's engagement ring. Worth easily a thousand dollars, it meant little in a monetary way to Blayne. He would do anything to keep it. He wondered just how this leader would feel if he propositioned him.

"Look here," he said suddenly, as the thug passed a hand into his pocket. "I know you won't pass up this ring, so I'm calling your attention to it. It's something I don't want to lose. Let me keep it and I'll give you double its worth in money."

"Yeah?" the leader sneered and laughed gruffly. "I'll give you my name and address so you can send

it to my secretary, huh? Listen, guy, get that rock off your finger or I'll rip it off."

"YOU can come to my apartment—" Blayne began hopelessly.

"Oh, sure. I'll pay you a social visit, huh? You and half the cops in the city. Like fun, wise guy. You get that rock off."

Blayne bit his lip. Anger was slowly surging through him.

"You," he said slowly, "can go to the devil."

But he wasn't prepared for the consequences. The leader held an automatic in his gloved fist. He raised it and brought the gun down

in a smashing arc. It caught Blayne on the right cheek, ripped flesh and bone. The gun went up again and crashed down on his skull. He slid to the floor, his mask grinning merrily upward at the bandit.

The leader bent down, tore the ring from Blayne's finger and threw it into the sack. He passed on to the next victim.

Blayne opened his eyes a moment later, but he lay still. There was nothing he could do. The sub-machine-guns still controlled the room and stifled whatever desires he might have felt for revenge against the masked leader.

He lay still and watched through slitted eyes.

The leader was working on the women now. Those who did not hand over the thousands of dollars represented by their shimmering jewels, saw them torn from their throats, ripped from their wrists and arms.

One woman, her face that of a paint-smeared clown, drew herself up as the thug came before her. What she said, Blayne couldn't hear, but the automatic came up again. The woman slipped into a huddled little heap on the floor. The bandit ruthlessly tore off the jewelry, cursed her volubly and passed on.

IT was over in less than ten minutes. Then Blayne had a chance to witness the efficiency with which the whole job had been pulled. Servants had been herded into one room, detectives had been smacked hard on their derbies and laid to rest on the floor with a machine-gun to watch over them.

Outside Blayne could hear powerful motors purring. They roared into life as the bandits backed out of the room through the French windows.

Slowly arms began to sag and then one or two of the courageous ones

came to life again. Two men hurried to the fallen woman's side and lifted her to a davenport behind the palm-screened orchestra.

Two other men helped Blayne to his feet. He slipped off his mask and mopped away the blood with his pocket handkerchief. His face was, itself, a mask of anger.

A man, trembling and ashen, came from behind the palms.

"Mrs. Hazen," he whispered. "She's dead! That blow on the head killed her."

BLAYNE went to the davenport, looked down at the kindly old face of Mrs. Hazen and began to curse softly. A burly detective brushed him aside. Someone had called the police.

"Did anybody see those birds?" he asked.

"No, Officer," one man replied. "They were all masked."

Sergeant Hensey nodded shortly, understandingly.

"They always are," he said bitterly. "Sure nobody here could identify any of 'em?"

Only negative shakes of heads answered him. He took out his notebook, cornered the hostess and began to ask questions. He listed the missing jewelry and when he had added the total he grunted.

"Best haul they've made in months," he said. "Four hundred grand! Will those guys step now?"

"You mean," Blayne asked slowly, "that these same men have pulled other holdups like this one?"

"Only about a dozen," Hensey replied. "So far we haven't got a scrap of evidence against them. Not one piece of the stolen jewelry has showed up yet. This is the first time they ever committed murder, though. It's going to make it tougher for them. They'll probably lay low for a good while now."

"In the meantime," Blayne asked

in a silken voice, "you are going to do just what?"

Hensey shrugged.

"What can we do?" he asked. "Nobody ever saw one of those mugs. If we did round 'em up, how are we going to convict? I got a hunch who this gang is, but what good's a hunch in court?"

"Believe me, Mister, you gotta all but have the crime committed in front of the jury's eyes nowadays before they'll convict, what with the smart shysters these guys dig up. No, sir, there ain't a thing we can do except watch every fence."

"What's your hunch, Sergeant?" Blayne asked softly. "I mean—just who do you suppose is behind these men?"

"Well," Hensey hesitated, eyeing Blayne steadily, "it won't do any harm to tell you, I guess. That leader was kinda short and pudgy, wasn't he?"

Blayne nodded. The description fitted the leader well.

"I'll bet my next year's pay that guy was Slink Cornora. He's a killer if there ever was one. Used to head a gang of rod-men before repeal. But the guy who's really behind it all is a mug named Alex Gandy. We ain't never seen him—don't know who he really is, but some day—"

"**A**ND while you're waiting for that 'some day,' these holdups and murders will go on just the same as ever," Blayne snorted. "Swell judicial system we have. The police know who the bandits might be, and they can't even arrest 'em. I could do better myself."

"Yeah," Sergeant Hensey laughed. "Why the devil don't you try to do it then?"

Blayne stiffened, banged the table beside which they were standing and turned his head toward the detective. He opened his mouth and then slowly

shut it again. He didn't say what his brain had suddenly formulated.

CHAPTER II

NOCTURNAL CALLER



BLAYNE drove home slowly. His mind was whirling and seething with hate and disgust. Hate for the bandits who had robbed and killed so ruthlessly. Disgust for the judicial system of a great state that perforce protected the criminal as well as the law abiding citizen.

He left his car at the garage, took his mask and costume from the rear seat and went into the great apartment hotel where he lived.

Blayne lived alone. The staff of the hotel took care of his wardrobe and his rooms. He opened the door to his apartment and dropped into a chair, not even removing his hat or coat.

For ten minutes he sat there, deep in thought.

How could he act? What could he do against organized crime? If the police, with all their men, all their brains, were powerless, how could he hope to succeed? It would be next to impossible to locate the headquarters of the gang, anyway.

"Pshaw!" he grunted. He rose, paced the floor for a moment or two and then realized that he still wore his coat and hat. He threw them on a lounge, began to undress.

But one thing persisted in his mind. How could he locate Slink Cornora and Alex Gandy? He knew very well that if he made inquiries, he would betray his own identity, and he wished to keep that a secret as far as the bandits were concerned.

He glanced at the clock over the fireplace. "Two A.M.," he grunted. He turned off the light and got into bed.

He was drowsing off when sudden-

ly he was startled by a bright light shining directly in his eyes.

"I ain't gonna hurt you. Too bad you were slugged tonight, but when we say something, we mean it. Next time, lift your arms and keep 'em there," a man at his side was saying. Blayne lowered his arms slowly and remained supine.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "you have come here to give me back the ring I asked for."

"That's it," the man said. "It don't take you long to catch on!"

"How did you know where I lived?" Blayne asked and then cursed himself for a fool. They had taken his wallet.

"We found your card in your pocketbook. I got the pocketbook, too. You can have it back, but it'll cost you five grand, mister, for the ring. Oh, yes, there's a couple of pictures inside the wallet, too. Nice lookin' dames. Like to meet 'em myself."

"They'd appreciate you, I'm sure," Blayne grinned. "About the diamond—five thousand is too much. I'll give you two thousand. That's four times as much as you'll get from a fence."

"Nothing doing," the masked man snapped. "The boss says five grand and that's the only language I talk. Take it or leave it, Mister."

"I HAVEN'T got five thousand dollars in cash here," Blayne replied. "You'll have to wait."

"Lemme look around. Mister. Maybe there's something else you can trade for the rock, huh?"

"Look around—go on," Blayne said. "Unless you take the furniture and the paintings, there isn't that much money represented here. You'll have to come back later. Tell you what—come back here any time you want to, after tomorrow morning. I promise I won't have the police waiting for you, and I'll have the

money here ready for you then."

"Okay, Mister," the bandit told him. "I ain't saying just when I'll be back, but it'll be sometime soon. Have the dough and you'll get your rock. Don't try to tail me. If you do, I'll have to use my gat on you. This time it won't be just a sock with it, either. It'll be hot lead."

The bandit went to the living room door, held his gun steady as he opened it. He placed the key outside, slipped out and slammed the door after him. Before Blayne heard the key grate in the lock, he was up. He found his clothes right at his bedside. He never dressed so quickly in his life. He knew that the thief would make a very slow and cautious getaway.

HE grinned as he grabbed up his hat and coat. Back into the bedroom he raced, opened a window and stepped to a fire escape. He went down like a monkey. Trained muscles were serving him well. Those daily games of handball had been worth while after all.

On the quiet street he saw the vanishing back of his quarry. The man would go on foot part of the way before he hailed a cab.

So far, Blayne hadn't donned his coat and the chill night air went through his tuxedo. He stepped into a doorway, slipped his arms into the sleeves. Something fell to the walk. He bent down and picked up his mask. With a grin he shoved it into his pocket, went on the trail again.

His man didn't hail a cab. Instead, he began to take short cuts and Blayne had a hard time keeping him in sight. Had it been broad daylight and the streets crowded, it would have been hopeless.

It was clear that the thug was intent on throwing any possible pursuer off the trail. It was a silent bow to Blayne's trailing ability that he hadn't been seen.

The bandit hesitated before a grimy-looking night club front. He looked about a moment, vanished into the dimly lit lobby. Blayne waited a moment or two, undecided. Naturally, he couldn't just walk into the place. He'd be recognized in a moment.

HE skirted the building, went down a dreary alley to the back entrance. The door was tightly closed and so were the windows. For a moment, Blayne thought of smashing a window, but realized the futility of it all.

Suddenly the back room was filled with light. Voices—harsh, cruel voices—reached him through the flimsy walls. He raised his head and peered into the room.

There were four men inside. One was a tall, hook-nosed man, carefully dressed and oozing self-confidence and ego. Two other men were nondescript gangsters. The fourth was the man Blayne had followed. This was Slink Cornora, he was sure.

"You rat," the tall leader snarled loudly. "Why didn't you turn in that diamond ring?"

"Honest, Chief," Cornora sniveled, "I was gonna get cash for it and turn that in. I went back to the guy I swiped it offa. He told me he'd give me five grand for the rock. It's a cinch, Chief, we couldn't get five hundred bucks from a fence."

"You were going to keep that money for yourself," the leader cried. "You killed a woman tonight with that gun of yours. Can't you keep that gun down? The police will be stirred up plenty now."

"Don't you think they have a hunch who you are? Sergeant Hensey isn't as dumb as he looks. He's got plenty under that hat of his."

"To the devil with Hensey," Cornora grated. "For two cents I'd bump him."

"Then tonight," the leader went on steadily, "you went to this man's apartment to collect that money. Were you masked?"

"I didn't need to be—the room was dark."

To himself Blayne grinned. Something was going to happen.

It happened quickly!

"You showed your face," the leader said grimly. "That man you visited tonight will have a description of you. Sergeant Hensey will have something definite then. He'll pick you up in a minute—and rats like you talk, when the chair stares them in the face. Sorry, Slink—you've got to take it."

THE bandit whirled suddenly, went for his gun. But the other two men had been forewarned. Their automatics spoke as one. Cornora spun around once and then crashed to the floor.

"Dump it in the river," the leader said without feeling. "Either of you know the name of the man Slink visited tonight? It might be well to put him out of the way, too—before he starts thinking."

"Don't know, Boss," one man answered. "Slink held out on us."

"Very well," the leader grated. "Make sure none of *you* holds out on me. Slink is dead! He can't talk! Don't weight the body down. I want the cops to find it later, in case they're looking for him."

"After you get rid of the body, beat it to your hotels and stay under cover until you hear from me. We've got another job to do tomorrow. A good one—half a million at least. Tell the rest of the boys to be here."

"Okay, Boss." The stockier of the two men seemed to be thinking. "How about our cut, Boss?" he asked. "We ain't got nuthin' outa this so far."

"Not that we don't trust you," he

added hastily, when he saw an icy film come over the leader's eyes. "No, it ain't that. But all of us are broke. We gotta have some dough."

"You'll have it, Pudgy," the tall leader snapped. "I've an appointment with a fence tomorrow. He's an Englishman and he'll take the stuff out of the country. I can get more from him. Tomorrow night, then, meet the cars at the usual place—at nine. The job is to be pulled at eleven."

The tall man stalked out of the room while Blayne watched. Should he follow him? He decided against it. He was new at the game. Better to work on the small fry first.

He climbed a fence, and lay hidden when he heard the rear door open. A car purred into the alley. He peered over the fence and saw the two men throw the limp thing that had been Slink Cornora into the tonneau.

The car backed out of the alley and away.

Blayne shuddered a little. That body might very well have been his own. He would have to be cautious. His hand, going into his pocket, found the mask. Inspiration came to him. He would use the mask.

ONLY one of the bandits had ever seen his face and Slink would never tell. None knew his identity. He could work smoothly, without fear of hazard, so long as they never saw his face.

He slipped to the street again, hurried half a block north and sank into the shadows of a doorway. If a patrolman ever came along, there would be the devil to pay, but he had to chance it.

He had only a short time to wait. The two men who had murdered Slink emerged from the club. They walked briskly north and Blayne stepped out to follow. The stouter of the two, Pudgy, had his ring. He

was going to get that back. And most important of all, old Mrs. Hazen's death must be avenged.

CHAPTER III

A GOOD NIGHT'S EXERCISE



THE two men separated a dozen blocks further ahead. Blayne's man went directly to a cheap hotel. Blayne took up an advantageous point and watched the darkened building. Suddenly one room was filled with light. That would be Pudgy's.

So far lady luck had beamed on Blayne. He resolved to give her one more try.

There was a side entrance to the hotel and he stole inside. In the deserted lobby the night clerk was sleeping soundly. Blayne climbed the stairs softly. Halfway up he paused, adjusted the blood-smeared mask over his face and then went on, a grim smile playing on his lips under the covering.

He found the room easily. For a moment he hesitated. What should he do? If he made too much noise, the hotel would be aroused; and he didn't doubt but that the occupants of the rooms would be friends of Pudgy's. He knocked softly on the door.

"Who the devil—?" Pudgy's voice came from within.

"Keep quiet, you fool," Blayne hissed in a good imitation of the tall leader. "I want to see you a moment—alone."

"Cripes, boss," Pudgy busied himself about the room a moment. "Okay. I—I didn't expect—"

"Open the door," Blayne snarled.

As the door opened, Blayne saw an automatic in Pudgy's hand. He lunged, knocked the bandit off his feet and then leaped upon him. Pudgy's eyes were bulging. All he could see was the ghastly face, the

thin cheeks, the bent nose and the blood-smeared face. Originally that mask had been funny; now it was gruesome.

A moment and Pudgy was disarmed. Blayne rose, flung the gun under the bed and waited, hands folded across his chest. "Come on," he said softly. "Get up!"

"You—" Pudgy half rose and tensed for a spring.

"Hurry up," Blayne begged. "Make a swing at me. I'm waiting for an excuse to knock your head off your shoulders."

"Yeah?"

Pudgy came like a flash, but he met hard knuckles. His head rocked and for a moment he thought this masked stranger had made good his word. Another blow, and another. Pudgy tried to get his hands up for a defense, but the blows rained ceaselessly down on him. There was fierce fury and savage delight in Blayne's relentless attack.

"Murder an old woman, would you?" he grated. "Smash an unarmed man on the head, eh? Why don't you smash someone now? Why don't you try searching my clothes now?"

"**WHO**—who the devil are you?" Pudgy darted to one corner of the room. He was rubbing his jaw and blinking. "What's the lay?"

"You're a murderer, you stinking louse," Blayne said softly. "You murdered tonight at the orders of your boss. You shot a man in the back. You're going to pay for that now; and later on your pal, the one who fired the other shot into Slink Cornora's body, will pay. Come on, put up your fists like a man!"

"No!" Pudgy flattened himself hysterically against the wall. "Don't hit me again. I had to bump Slink. If I didn't, I'd 'a' been killed myself. If the boss ever finds out you tailed me, I'll be bumped anyway.

"I didn't conk that old dame at the holdup. I didn't sock the guy either. Slink did that."

"You would have done the same thing," Blayne roared. "You're just as guilty, even if you only looked on. For killing that old lady—absorb this."

His fist rattled half a dozen teeth loose in Pudgy's face.

"For being with a gang of murderers—this." Pudgy's eye closed. He went grovelling to the floor. Blayne stood over him, his crazy mask staring stonily downward at the prostrate man.

"**P**UT on your clothes," he ordered. "You've got a date."

Pudgy obeyed shakily. He could see out of only one eye and his jaw felt like so much raw beef. This man, whose own face was covered with a false face, could hit like a kangaroo.

Flashing eyes watched the bandit as he dressed. Pudgy gave up any idea of trying to grab up his gun from beneath the bed.

"The ring." Blayne held out his hand.

"Ring?" Pudgy stared at him. "Say—you ain't the guy Slink visited tonight?"

"Maybe I am," Blayne snapped. "Maybe I'm not. But I want that ring, and I want it now."

Pudgy silently handed over the ring.

"Next, I want to know how you contact that boss of yours?" Blayne said.

"Gandy?" Pudgy stared at him. "Cripes, Mister, you ain't gonna tackle him. He's a big shot. You won't get past the front door."

"How do you call him?" Blayne went on tonelessly. "Do you tell me or do I knock it out of you?"

"I don't call him," Pudgy said. "He calls me. When he wants me, he just calls my room. I gotta park

here until he does, so you ain't gonna get him that way."

"No?" Blayne laughed a little. "Come on. We're going out!"

"Where the—" Pudgy started.

"Shut up!" Blayne silenced him. "Make any noise going out, and I'll mark you for life."

Pudgy believed he could do it. He kept his mouth tightly closed as he preceded the masked man down the short flight of steps and out to the street. Blayne looked up and down for a moment. In another few minutes the city's early-morning traffic would stir into life. He would have to work fast.

Suddenly Pudgy saw his chance. He hurled himself at the masked form and the two men went down to the sidewalk. Pudgy reached up a hand to rip away the mask, but a fist caught him squarely under the chin. He got up, crouched and charged again.

This time Blayne was waiting. Pudgy suddenly went up into the air and came down, spread-eagled on the sidewalk, his head hanging into the gutter.

"Thanks," Blayne grinned as he slipped off the mask, "for giving me an excuse to sock you. I wondered just what I was going to do with you."

HE walked hastily away, found an all-night lunchroom and went into the phone booth at one end. He dialed Police Headquarters.

"Get this straight," he said clearly when the desk sergeant answered. "Wake up Sergeant Hensey. Then send one of your radio cars to the side entrance of the Copla Hotel.

"There's a man lying on the sidewalk. He murdered another man known as Slink Cornora. Tell Hensey he can find Slink's body if he drags the river for it."

"Say," the sergeant asked doubtfully, "is this on the level?"

"Send your radio car—and hurry. If that murderer gets away, it's your fault."

"Okay, Mister. I'll do it and I'll get Hensey out of bed too. If it's a joke, I'd hate to be in your shoes when he finds you. Who'll I say called?"

"Well," Blayne hesitated, felt of the mask in his pocket. "You might say—Funny Face!"

"I'll be hanged," he heard the sergeant grunt.

Blayne waited until he heard the siren of a radio cruiser. Then he walked rapidly back toward his apartment hotel. He went in with the milk man.

CHAPTER IV

KILLER'S END



UNTIL early afternoon Blayne slept the sleep of the just. When he awoke, his fist was a little sore, but otherwise he felt fine. He ate sparingly. With the cover of darkness he had another job to do. There had been a second murderer and then, too, there was going to be another holdup.

He scanned the morning papers for a clue and found it readily. The Two Hundred and First Regiment Military Ball. All the glittering glory of the city's jewels would be there. It would be a half million dollar haul, all right.

He spent the afternoon experimenting with a strange little device that was strapped to his forearm. By a certain flick of his wrist he could throw a tiny automatic into the palm of his hand. He practiced it until he was perfect. Anything less than perfection would mean sudden death, and he knew it.

He inserted the mask so that it fitted into the lining of a soft hat. With a sweep of his hand he could

bring it into position on his face. Meanwhile, it could be carried about safely.

He decided to pay Sergeant Hensey a visit. It was one way of making the afternoon roll by, and, then, he might pick up some good pointers.

He found the sergeant busily engaged in his office.

"Hello, Sergeant," Blayne greeted him. "I dropped around to see if there was any trace of my ring yet."

"There is," Hensey grunted. "We picked up a man early this morning. He admitted that he had the ring and that someone—he called the guy Funny Face because of a mask that covered his mug—took the ring away from him. That same person called the office here. He knew my name, too—say, where were you this morning?"

"Me?" Blayne dropped his jaw. "I was home—in bed, like all decent people."

"I'm not going to ask you to prove it," Hensey answered grimly. "I do not know whether or not you are Funny Face, but you struck me as though you meant business last night when the woman was killed at the party. I've had you on my mind ever since."

"**S**AY—you had on a funny mask then, too. Funny Face? That would fit your mug to a T with that mask you had on."

"But it wasn't I," Blayne insisted mildly. "I really don't know what you're talking about. I came here to see about my ring, and you're giving me some inane story. Are you feeling well, Sergeant?"

"Yeah," Hensey grunted. "I feel swell. I got a killer known as Pudgy Malone locked up. He'll confess and if he don't, it won't make any difference. We got the body of the man he shot; we got his gun, and it did the shooting. Pudgy's going to the chair. If we could only get the

big guy behind him. We will too—some day."

"Really," Blayne replaced his black fedora on his head. "I'm quite ignorant as to what you're talking about. Some other time, Sergeant, when you're not so busy—"

Hensey scowled at Blayne's vanishing back. He shook his head slowly. Funny Face? Hensey doubted it—and then, he thought of Blayne's face when he had learned Mrs. Hazen was dead. The sergeant gave up.

BLAYNE crawled behind the wheel of his roadster and sat there a moment. He had three things to do: Get the second murderer of Slink Cornora; take from the possession of Alex Gandy the loot the half dozen holdups had netted him; and, last, to deliver into Sergeant Hensey's hands the big shot of the gang—Alex Gandy himself.

It was dark when he pulled the roadster up before the entrance of a cheap flop house. He eyed the group of loiterers around the doorway and beckoned to one who looked as if he had seen better days. The derelict put one foot on the running board. There was an inquiring look in his eyes.

"Want to earn twenty dollars?" Blayne asked.

"Do I?" the shabby man asked. "Who do I kill?"

"Get in the car," Blayne said and opened the door. The man slid into the seat and let himself sink back on the leather cushions. He sighed ecstatically as the car slid into the traffic.

Blayne took him far out of the city. He pulled into a country road, drew to the side and stopped.

"To earn the twenty dollars," Blayne said, "you'll have to give me your clothes. I'll give you mine in their place—you won't lose by it."

For answer the man began to

strip off his clothes. He was grinning at Blayne.

"If you didn't look so sensible," he said, "I'd swear you were cracked. But that's nothing to me, Mister. You don't even have to give me the twenty—let me have two bucks and I'll be satisfied."

"It's twenty," Blayne told him as he began to divest himself of his clothes. He idly watched as the tramp's shoulders were bared. There were powerful, perfectly developed muscles under that grimy shirt. This man had seen better days.

The change completed, Blayne drove the stranger back to the city. He parked the car at a deserted street and got out. His passenger climbed out too. The two men shook hands firmly.

"Thanks, Mister," the tramp said. "In case you have any more clothes you don't want—and any more twenty bucks too—you can call me at my apartment—the flop house. Just ask for Tippy Flynn."

The name had a familiar ring, but Blayne didn't ponder on it. He walked quickly to the cheap night club where Slink had been murdered. There was a bar inside and he sauntered up to it. He dropped a bill on the wet mahogany.

"Straight," he growled.

THE drink was passed over and he downed it with a gulp. He leaned over the bar and motioned for the bartender.

"Listen," he whispered, "I just got outta the city jail. There's a guy up there named Pudgy Malone. I gotta flash for a pal of his. You know who I mean?"

"Wait a minute." The bartender vanished. When he returned, he beckoned for Blayne to come close.

"It's Nick Palermo you want," he said. "I just phoned him. You go up to ninety-seven Devon Street. The third floor right. Got that?"

"Yeah," Blayne replied. "Thanks."

It was almost too easy, he thought, as he hailed a cab. Ninety-seven Devon Street was a slovenly spot. He went into the dirty old brick house, climbed the stairs and at the third landing, paused.

He still had his black fedora. It was the only outer clothing that Tippy Flynn hadn't been given. He drew the mask over his face, fitted it comfortably and went on.

BEFORE Nick's door he paused. Then he knocked softly. Nick's voice told him to wait a moment and then the door was opened a crack.

Blayne hurled himself at the door, sent the swarthy gangster sprawling in a heap on the floor. He bounded inside, closed the door and locked it. He looked about the dingy room, made sure Nick was alone, and then he picked the gangster up, gripped him firmly by the throat.

"Know who I am, Nick?" he asked.

"F-Funny Face," Nick gasped. "You're the guy who put Pudgy away. What—what's the idea?"

"The idea is that you can't commit murder and get away with it—not even if you kill one of your own kind, you rat."

Nick wrested himself loose. He stepped back. Under the pillow of his bed was a gun. If he could only reach it—

He started to back up toward the bed.

Funny Face stood, arms hanging down, before the thug. One arm came up suddenly and pointed squarely at Nick's face. As if by magic, Nick saw a gun appear in that fist. He could have sworn that there had been none there an instant before.

"Is Gandy going to call you tonight?" Blayne demanded softly.

"No—no—for God's sake, you ain't gonna go after him?" There was stark incredulity in the voice.

"I asked you if he was going to

call you?" Blayne went on. "Answer me!"

There was no denying that tone. Nick had heard what Pudgy looked like when the cops got him. He wet his lips. "Yeah—he's gonna tell me something. He'll call soon."

"So?" Blayne dropped the gun into his pocket. Nick mistook the gesture for one of hopeless surrender. He made a dive for the pillow, got his hand beneath it and felt the warm steel of his gun. Then a fist connected with the back of his neck.

He saw a multitude of stars and went to the floor. He rose, a moment later, and snarled his hate at the comic-faced mask that looked down at him. He hurled himself at the unknown man.

Blayne stepped aside, avoided the lunge and then closed in. Nick tried to get his hands on the mask to tear it away, but Blayne's fists were too accurate and too swift. One blow snapped Nick's head back, the second raised him off the floor. He went backward, his head striking a chair.

Blayne knelt beside him. Nick would be out for hours.

HE dropped into a chair beside the telephone, drew out a cigarette and stuck it between the lips of the mask. He puffed on it slowly. The phone jangled. He lifted the receiver and in a good imitation of Nick's voice barked a greeting.

"You will be ready in an hour," the voice said. It was Gandy, without doubt. "We act at eleven tonight. The cars will be waiting at the usual place. We shall have plenty of time. Have you heard from that fool of a Pudgy?"

"Yeah, Boss," Blayne said. "He sent a message to me from stir. Listen, Boss, I know who the guy is that Slink visited. Yeah—the one that wanted his ring back. His name is Blayne and he lives at the Rochester. Yeah—that's right,

"Huh?—Okay, I'll stay here. Make it ten o'clock now, huh? Okay, Boss."

He hung up, waited a moment and then lifted the receiver. He called Headquarters and got Sergeant Hensley on the wire.

"This is a good friend, Sergeant," he said. "I'm calling you from the third floor of ninety-seven Devon Street. You'll find an unconscious man on the floor. Under the pillow on the bed you'll find a gun that will match one of the bullets from Slink Cornora's body."

"YEAH?" Hensley grunted. "And who are you—Santy Claus?"

"Well," Blayne grinned beneath his mask, "yes—and no. You might call me Funny Face. And, oh, yes, Sergeant. It might be well to watch the Military Ball tonight. You know the one? Just a hunch, you know, but it might pan out. There'll be two or three cars filled with unwelcome guests."

He hung up, put his mask inside his hat again and hurried from the building. Radio patrol cars were apt to be very sudden in answering alarms. He was right. Before he was two blocks away, he saw a cruiser pull to the curb and two men dash into the building. When they came out, they carried the sodden form of Nick between them. They heaved him into the rear of the car and were off.

Funny Face grinned pleasantly. But there wasn't much satisfaction in avenging the death of a man like Slink—even though Slink had wanted to give the ring back to him.

Blayne, the mask removed, dodged down alleys and over fences. Finally he found his roadster, still parked at the curb. He looked about, the street was deserted. He climbed behind the wheel and started for his apartment.

He didn't dare bring the roadster to the garage; the attendant might

take in the tattered clothing he still had on. For the same reason he went into his apartment hotel by way of the rear entrance.

Once in his own apartment again, Blayne laid out formal clothing. He had guests coming and he didn't want to offend them. He laughed as he showered and dressed.

He went into the bedroom, arranged pillows beneath the covers of the bed to resemble a human form. Then, in his tuxedo, he went back into the living room, donned his blood-smeared mask and sat down.

CHAPTER V

FUNNY FACE RECEIVES



HE didn't have to wait long. The clock told him that in an hour, the gang would be at work at the Military Ball. Gandy wouldn't be with them. He kept in the background, planned, and took the hog's share of the profits.

But Gandy would do some work to-night. His men would be busy with the big holdup, and he would attend to the menace of the so-far harmless Blayne himself. It wasn't important enough to take more than ten minutes of his time.

And Blayne was right. He heard a faint click and turned his eyes to the door. A master hand was manipulating the lock from the outside. The door began to open, slowly. Blayne made certain his mask was properly adjusted and sat still.

The door swung open silently and the tall form of Gandy was framed in its portals. There was an automatic in his hand and he leveled it at the figure in the chair. He stepped into the room, closed the door again. Then he came closer, saw the mask that covered the face.

"Funny Face!" he ejaculated. "You, here?"

"In the flesh. Won't you sit down? This isn't my home, but I'm sure Mr. Blayne would want me to welcome you. He's—ah—*hors de combat* in the next room. I drugged him. The less he knows the better."

"HOW did you know I was coming here?" Gandy demanded.

"Oh," Funny Face raised his head, "then you haven't heard what happened to your very good friend Nick Palermo? Too bad! Nick was arrested just a few minutes ago. I imagine by this time he's safe in the gentle hands of Sergeant Hensey."

"So you put it over on Nick too?" Gandy grunted. His gun remained steady as he seated himself where he could hold a bead on his opponent. "You ought to be on my side, Funny Face. What's your game, anyway?"

"Well," Blayne replied, "you might call me the law—outside the law. Figure that one out."

"Taking justice in your own hands, eh?" Gandy muttered. "You're a fool, Funny Face. Just as much a fool as that crazy mask makes you out to be. If the law catches you, it will treat you exactly like it would Pudgy or Nick or—"

"Yourself?" Blayne asked.

"Pshaw, man," Gandy answered with a mirthless laugh. "The law can't get me. I've never done anything wrong."

"You wouldn't submit to a search right now, I hope?" Blayne said.

"What? Funny Face—you're a devil. How did you know I have the jewels on me?"

"Mental telepathy," Blayne answered easily. "Call it that if you want. Half a million even, with what a fence will give you. I suppose you're on your way to meet your English friend—the one who is to take the gems off your hands?"

Gandy was floored for a moment. This comically masked man seemed allied with the supernatural. How

had he learned of that intended deal? Gandy's eyes blazed.

"I'm going to have a look at your face after I kill you," he snarled.

"Yes?" Blayne lazily raised an arm ceilingward and yawned. As the hand came down, a little spout of flame came from it. Gandy went backward, tipping over the chair in which he had been seated. He got to his feet again, looked down at a shattered hand. Then his eyes traveled, with mixed awe and fury, toward the masked figure.

"How'd you do that?" he demanded, his eyes fastened on the little gun in Blayne's hand. "You didn't have that gat a minute ago."

"True," Funny Face replied with a low laugh. "Can't you see, Gandy, that I am favored of the gods?"

"**YOU'VE** got to die, Funny Face," Gandy said in measured tones. "There's only one chance you've got at life. Let me see your face and then come over to my side of the fence. Together we can rule crookdom over the face of the earth."

"No thanks," Blayne responded. "I happen to have the upper hand and I'm in no mood for bargaining. Please remove from your pockets whatever jewels you may have."

"I'm warning you, Funny Face," Gandy went on without emotion. "Your one chance."

"I said—put the loot on that table." Blayne rose and stepped close to the man. "You have ten seconds to do it."

He saw Gandy's hand come up in a little gesture. Instantly there came the sound of shattered glass. Blayne whirled. A sub-machine-gun was nosing between the curtains of the window. Three men came into the room, grins spreading over their cruel faces.

Blayne dropped his gun and cursed himself for a fool. Things had been going too easily anyway. He should

have known that Gandy wouldn't have come alone. And never a thought of the fire escape outside the window had entered his head. Truly he was a fool.

Gandy had the upper hand. It would be over any moment now. Blayne backed against the wall.

GANDY followed and behind him came the three men. Blayne faced the door, Gandy and his men had their backs to it. They didn't see the door open very quietly. A man, tailored in perfectly fitting garments, crept into the room.

For a moment Blayne almost gave himself away. Tippy Flynn, the derelict he had swapped clothes with, was coming to his rescue.

Inwardly he laughed bitterly. Tippy was a fool too. There were four men in the room, killers all, not in the least averse to shedding blood. But Tippy came on relentlessly, one finger pressed against his lips to indicate silence.

Blayne was glad his face was masked. Had it been bared, he would probably have betrayed himself. What could this lone man do? He would only be killed! Both of them would go to a watery grave, unless Gandy decided to let them lie in the apartment amidst blood-soaked rugs.

Gandy was close now. Blayne saw that only one man held the machine-gun. The others undoubtedly were armed, but they hadn't bothered to draw their weapons. Their faces were creased in grim smiles. Gandy came within reaching distance of the mask.

"Funny Face," he gloated, "this is your finish. You're going to die—slowly. You're going to get a blast of that machine-gun in the stomach, where it hurts the most. You had your chance, but, at that, I'm glad you didn't decide to join me.

"I would have had to kill you sooner or later anyway. Perhaps it wouldn't have been so easy as it is

now. Will you take off your mask—or shall I?"

Tippy was crouched, like a bantam rooster. Suddenly he sprang with a wild cry, directly upon the back of the man who held the Tommy gun.

Blayne tried to follow the fight, but it was so short, his eyes lost track of the rapid movements. A moment and he saw Tippy charge a second man. The first one was out cold, his jaw at an odd angle. The machine-gun lay on the floor.

GANDY whirled at the sound of the attack and Bayne threw himself upon the gang leader. The two men fought silently, Gandy trying desperately to reach the weapon on the floor. Out of a corner of his eye Blayne had time to see the second gangster go down like a log under one of Tippy's blows.

The third man was backing toward the wall, his hand fumbling for his gun. Tippy never gave him a chance to reach it. His right flew with lightning rapidity. There was a crunch of breaking bone and the third man went down.

Gandy heaved suddenly. His knee, catching Blayne in the stomach, sent him flying toward the wall. He came down in a heap of tangled arms and legs. His shoulder hurt terribly and he was in agony with the kick Gandy had administered.

He saw, through blurred vision, the tall figure of Gandy stooping for the Tommy gun. He scooped it up, brought it down to bear on Tippy, who was ready for a charge. Blayne's brain whirled back to normal. His left hand went up, came down, and in the palm of it the automatic glittered.

He didn't hesitate. It was either Gandy or Tippy and it had to be the crook. The little automatic barked once. Gandy stiffened; the machine-gun went ceilingward and rattled lead into the plaster.

The crook made a supreme effort to turn around and lower the rifle in the direction of Funny Face. But the human frame could stand just so much, and Blayne's bullet had been well placed. He crumpled up.

Blayne's shoulders drooped a little. He ached all over; his head was spinning. Tippy, at the other side of the room, was grinning with an unholy delight. One of the gangsters was stirring into life and the well-dressed derelict went to his side, reached down and raised the man off the floor. His left hand went back, smashed once, and then he dropped the gangster back again.

He rubbed his fists and looked around with a speculative look. "And that," he said softly, "is that!"

Blayne rose. There wasn't much use in trying to keep his identity from the man he had befriended. He slipped the mask from his face and sat down heavily. Tippy grinned at him.

"So you're the famous Funny Face?" he said. "Blamed if I don't like the idea."

"HOW did you find me?" Blayne asked.

"By the clothes you gave me. You left half a dozen name cards in one of the pockets. I didn't feel right about keeping the rig, so I thought I'd bring it back. I heard the argument outside the door and—well, I just came in. Glad I did—swell scrap!"

"I'll say," Blayne grinned. "You sure can fight, buddy. Where'd you learn the game? That wasn't plain fighting you showed—that was science."

"Sure it is," Tippy laughed gleefully. "I used to be a pretty good lightweight—until booze got me. I guess I'm pretty good yet, huh?"

"You're a champion," Blayne told him. Now he knew why the name had sounded familiar. "But now that you

know who I am, what are you going to do about it?"

"Say," Tippy's face fell, "I don't even know you. I was just passing by and dropped in to see if you had a job. These guys were trying to rob you so I just sailed in and—well—"

"Buddy," Blayne grinned, "that's an idea. You've got a job! Let's drink to it."

"WITH all these—these bums hanging around?" Tippy asked doubtfully. "It wouldn't be right. I don't drink except in good company."

Blayne laughed. He went into the bedroom, straightened the bed he had made to resemble a man sleeping a drugged sleep. Then he phoned. He looked at Tippy a moment.

"What'll I call—the cops or the street cleaning department?"

"The cops," Tippy laughed. "The street cleaners would be okay, but they haven't got the equipment to move these carcasses. Say—that guy you plugged is deader'n a doornail."

"Too bad," Blayne said. "I always thought I'd hate to kill a man. But somehow, you know, it doesn't feel so bad."

"Bunk," Tippy remarked, "that wasn't a man!"

The telephone jangled. Outside the door, excited voices could be heard. Other families of the sedate hotel had been aroused by the shooting. Blayne lifted the phone. The house manager told him a regiment of policemen were on their way up.

Blayne opened the door to admit Sergeant Hensey with half a dozen men. Hensey stopped as he surveyed the littered room. He saw the bodies of the four men.

"Who—who—?" he began.

"My secretary, Tippy Flynn, and I came home a few moments ago, Sergeant. We found these men burglarizing our apartment. We had to do something, of course—"

"So we did," Tippy horned in.

Hensey nodded his ponderous head slowly. He turned to his men.

"Drag those guys out of here," he said. "Lock up the three that's alive. Send for the medical examiner to look at Gandy."

He watched as the unconscious men were removed. Gandy lay in death on the floor. Hensey eyed him glumly a moment, then turned to the two men.

"I don't know whether to bless you or damn you," he said, "but there won't be much lost by Gandy's death. He was raising a young army of crooks that would have been a menace in another year. I don't know how to take you, Blayne. I ought to arrest you, but under the circumstances—"

"Let's all have a drink," Blayne grinned. He poured three husky slugs, passed each man one.

"To crime!" he toasted. "Down with it!"

"Down with crime, heck," Tippy laughed. "Down with the booze!"

SERGEANT HENSEY set his glass carefully back on the tray.

"Anyway," he said, "we rounded up the gang that's been holding up all the ritzy parties in town."

"Oh," Blayne pursed his lips. "That's fine. The police awake at last!"

"And many thanks for the tip," Hensey went on. He walked toward the door. "This time you did help, but some day you might go in the wrong direction. When you do, I'll remember what you did for me tonight—Funny Face!"

Blayne looked in astonishment at Tippy. The other man gaped back.

"Say," Blayne started for the detective. "are you referring by any chance to my physiognomy?"

"Bah!"

Sergeant Hensey slammed the door on his way out.

Baffling Bluff

*The Osborne Murder Was a Mighty Strange Case—
Especially When the Corpse Vanished!*

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

Author of "Accusing Fingers," "Roots of Evil," etc.

HAVING made sure he was not being watched, the shifty-eyed man slipped furtively into Ole Devlin's hotel. Inside, he snatched up a newspaper from a vacant chair. "Millionaire Murdered! Body Vanished!" the headlines screamed, but he seemed to ignore the latest details of the Osborne murder and scanned the smaller front page items instead. Throwing down the paper at last with a gesture of relief, he stepped to the desk.

"I wanna room!" he said.

Ole's huge bulk remained motionless except for his lips.

"Name?"

"Jim Smith."

"Yeah?" With calm deliberation Ole's eyes swept the newcomer from head to foot. "Who sent you here?"

"Fellow name of Snag Petch. He's out west right now. In San Quentin doin' a stretch."

"You workin'?" There was peculiar emphasis on the second word.

"Not for awhile. Restin' up for my health's sake."

"Well, for your health's sake, don't pull anything while you stay here. It's a rule of the house. We don't want any cops bargin' in."

"That's exactly why I come here!" Smith retorted, and followed Ole to his room.

It was after dark when he came out, hurrying to a near by restaurant with coat collar up and cap

pulled well down over his eyes.

The second evening he came down earlier, and glancing through a late paper in the lobby gave a satisfied grin. He did not bother to pull cap down or put coat collar up when he went for the meal that was combination breakfast-lunch-dinner. Returning, he joined the crowd in Ole's back room and presently was taking a hand in a card game.

HE seemed more at ease now. The pertinent questions shot at him with apparent carelessness he parried cleverly. Otherwise, his remarks concerned only the cards, except once when the Osborne murder was mentioned.

"They can't have no murder case without a body!" he grunted. "The paper says the maid saw the body with the head bashed in, but it disappeared while she was getting over her faint. Her word don't prove Osborne got croaked. She could've had a pipe dream, couldn't she?"

"You said it!" remarked a beefy individual opposite him. "What did you say your name was?"

"Jim Smith is good enough right now. What's your handle?"

"Slugger Bates."

"Guess I've heard of you, then."

"Who from?"

"Fellow name of Corky Meadows you used to work with."

The Slugger's eyes narrowed.



"Corky hasn't been around these parts for a dog's age."

"And he won't be!" Smith grinned. "The guards don't take any chances with Corky since—" He stopped suddenly and glanced warily about him.

"No harm in talkin' around here," Slugger replied. "Nobody's going to squeal. Only one guy ever tried it. I heard they melted his body down for the lead that was in it."

Smith gave a bored yawn and picked up the cards.

"Y' know," Slugger continued, "you remind me of a dick I saw once. I heard he was on my trail and when I checked up on him yesterday, he seemed to have disappeared. Same day you turned up here." The Slugger's hand was under his armpit now. "I been wonderin' if you was him!"

Smith laughed. His hand did not falter as he dealt the cards.

"Then that makes two dicks disappeared yesterday," he said, "unless your dick and mine happened to be the same. Was yours named Gordon?"

"Yeah."

"Then don't worry about him. Him and the guy he was workin' with pretty near had me, but—" He paused warily. "Never mind what happened after that. I'm here, ain't I?"

"You croaked Gordon, eh?"

"Croaked?" Smith grinned. "You can't have no murder case if you haven't got a body. Suppose we say I was responsible for his disappearance. Ain't that how the newspapers put it?"

"Okay. You say Snag Petch told you to come here?"

"He mentioned the place one

time when I was workin' with him. Said it was a swell place to rest."

"It is. And likewise it sure would be an unhealthy place for any dick to butt in, believe you me."

"I'm sure glad to hear that." Smith sipped his liquor. "Whoosh!" he said. "I'm not used to much of that stuff—yet. They don't serve it where I been."

As he picked up his cards, the Slugger sipped his own liquor, then switched his glass with Smith's, which was not nearly so full. Four times during the next hour the Slugger repeated the maneuver with a wink at the others.

Smith's voice began to get thick and his words came awkwardly. He began to lose heavily and at last threw his cards down.

"Gonna quit!" he muttered. "That liquor's too strong for me. Spots on the cards keep dancin' around. Guess I'll go to bed."

"I'll take you up so you don't lose your way," Slugger offered. "I want to hear more about Snag Petch, too."

"Great fellow, Snag! Too careless with his gat, though. Him an'—Shay! Whatsamatter with these stairs?"

THE Slugger helped him up then and to his room.

"You were going to tell me about Snag Petch," he prompted.

"Yeah! Me and Snag bumped—" His brows knitted. "Say! You tryin' to pump me?"

Slugger grinned. "You don't have to talk if you don't want to. So you was in Leavenworth with Corky Meadows? Some of the fellows in this place came from there. Spotted any of 'em yet?"

"Sure. Tad Morton. Jed Steevers. Mike Odell."

"Yeah! But they didn't seem to be able to place you."

"No? See that mark down the

side o' my nose? Got my nose bust in a accident. Old geezer drivin' the car paid for me to get a new one. Lates' model. I can walk right up to a dick now, an'—shay, I'm talkin' too much again. Always do when I get liquored. You talk some now. Corky said you was a big shot around here."

"Some of the boys think so."

"YOU pulled some big jobs, the way Corky talked. Bump guys off for folks, don't you?"

Slugger chuckled. "So they tell me—when there's enough in it."

"J'ever clean up fifty grand on one job?"

"When times were good."

"Shay! Listen!" Smith peered at the door, then lowered his voice. "I cleaned up fifty grand in one job lasht week. I got it buried in a box near an old farmhouse, but there's a dick name of Babson got wise, and he's staked out there waiting for me to go back for it." He waved a fifty dollar bill.

"I should've brought more away, only I figured I could get it any time. I'm going back, though, and if that dick int'feres, I'll croak him, see? Fifty grand! All cash!"

Slugger's eyes glittered craftily.

"Think you'll need any help?" he asked.

"Shay? You tryin' 'o muscle in on my money?"

"Course not, buddy, but—well, I know that Babson guy. He's smart. He's tryin' to get somethin' on me, too, and seein' as you and me's pals, maybe you ought to have me along in case he's got a gang with him."

"Naw! He's workin' alone since I croaked—I mean—since Gordon disappeared."

"Quit kiddin' yourself, buddy. He's not that dumb. But if you want to take a chance on the hot seat, of course—"

"Who's takin' a chance?"

"You are, if there's anyone with him. Wouldn't cost you anything to have me along in case of accident."

"Well—I guess you're all right. Corky said you was. How about tomorrow night around eleven? I'll pinch a car, and—"

"Nix! You never know when a pinched car will quit on you. I'll get a good car, racing engine, phoney license plates and everything."

"Shay! You're a real pal. Le's have 'nother drink, an' then I gotta go to bed."

AT ten the next night Smith climbed behind the wheel of the car the Slugger brought. It purred into life, and presently the city lights were left behind and the car sped steadily along a moonlit road.

At last, at the top of a slight grade, Smith shut off the lights and the engine. As the car coasted silently down, he checked it occasionally with a touch on the perfectly working brakes. At the foot of the grade he turned into a tree-sheltered lane and let the car roll to a stop.

"See that farmhouse, Slugger?" He pointed eagerly between the trunks of two trees. "That's the place. Babson's staked out there somewhere. There's a path through the willows along the creek, and then—see this blackjack?"

"I get you. And I got a couple rods along in case—"

"Nix on the rods." Smith was vehement. "They make too much noise."

"In case of accidents!" Slugger finished. "And then I'm not particular who I use 'em on, so don't go tryin' any monkey business, buddy."

"You tryin' to start somethin'?"

"Naw. I'm just warnin' you not to. You go first. I'll be right behind—in case of accidents, see!"

For a moment Smith glared; then he shrugged.

"Let's go!" he snapped, and led the way. The moonlight filtered through the willows sufficiently to light their way.

Suddenly Smith jerked to an abrupt stop.

"THERE'S Babson!" he whispered. "Sittin' on that knoll in front of that bush! Right where I can sneak up behind him. Boy, what a break!"

"Go to it!" the Slugger replied. "And don't forget I'm packing two rods! Savvy?"

Silently they crept forward. Smith crept up behind the sheltering bush, then edged around it on the soft grass until his shadow fell full upon the sitting detective's back. He took one quick step forward, blackjack upraised.

The shadow fell in front of Babson, who leaped to his feet and whirled, at the same moment reaching for his gun. His startled shout was cut short by the crash of the blackjack on his head. With a groan he slumped, and once more the blackjack rose and descended viciously upon his upturned face, leaving a vivid welt of red where it struck.

Again the blackjack rose, but at that moment a light flashed in a window of the old farmhouse.

"Scram!" the Slugger barked. "He had a pal around, like I told you he would. You sure balled things up letting him get that yell out. Come on!"

Frantically they raced along the willow-covered path, tripping, stumbling, picking themselves up again, until they reached the car. Slugger leaped behind the wheel and started the engine with a roar. From the

farmhouse came an answering roar. Then they were off.

"We got a fair start!" Slugger grunted. "What's the matter with you? Say! Get the bottle behind the cushion and take a snort. You're all trembling."

Smith dug for the bottle and raised it to his lips. Slugger kept his eyes alternately on the road and the rear-view mirror. Several times the bottle went to Smith's lips, and at last the Slugger spoke:

"We ditched 'em," he grunted. "They never got near enough to see us. Lucky thing this road is hilly. Gimme that bottle now!"

"'S empty!" Smith hurled it drunkenly at the ditch. "Shay! That sure was good licker, Sh—Shlugger."

"What d'you drink it all for, you hog," Slugger snapped. "Didn't y' ever croak a guy before?"

"Sh—shure! Plenty!"

"Well, you don't act like you did. And you hit that dick like a greenhorn. You didn't have to hit him twice, either. That first smack could've been heard a couple o' miles away."

"Shay! It was Babson all right, wasn't it?"

"**Y**EAH! It was him all right. I guess you're okay. Y' know, you and me ought to team up. I could show you a few things, and—"

"Team up? Shay, you tryin' to muscle in on my fifty grand?"

"Course not. I'm just sayin'—"

"Okay, Slugger! You're all ri', and maybe—well, I guess I can take care o' myself! Only trouble is, I talk too much when I get licker. But you're all ri', Slugger. I bet you croaked pretty near as many guys as I have."

"The way you pulled this job, it looked like it was your first."

"'S 'at so? Listen, fellow. J'ever hear of Randall Peters? They

never found out who croaked him, did they?"

"You're not tellin' me you did?"

"I'm not tellin' anything, see! But I'm no greenhorn. When I do a job, I do it good."

"You're good at boasting, anyway."

"Yeah? Shay! J'ever hear of—of Michael Osborne?"

THE Slugger jerked his eyes from the road ahead for one suspicious glance at the other.

"Yeah!" he snapped. "You're not telling me you croaked him?"

"Sure I did!"

The Slugger laughed uproariously.

"Now I know you're boastin'!" he bellowed. Then suddenly his jaws snapped shut.

"You callin' me a liar?" Smith snarled.

Slugger relaxed.

"You're a prize little kidder when you're lit," he retorted. "I'm beginning to think you didn't even croak that guy Gordon."

"I croaked Babson t'night, didn't I?"

"I gotta hand it to you for that, buddy."

"Well, I got fifty grand says I croaked Osborne, see!"

"You're drunk."

"I'm sober! Shoher as a horse, an' I got fifty grand says I ain't a liar. I croaked Peters, and Gordon, and Babson, and—and Michael Osborne, see!"

"Listen, sap!" The Slugger's tone was impatient. "You're full o' booze and fairy tales. I've got five grand says you didn't croak Osborne."

Smith eyed him with owlsh solemnity.

"All ri'! T'morrow night I'll show you where Michael Osborne's body is, an' if I don't—"

"I get the fifty grand, eh?"

"Sure."

"Okay, buddy, if you insist. Now shut up while I do some dodging through these streets. We don't want any cop to stop us and see all that blood splashed all over your hands. If they find out who croaked that dick, you'll burn."

NEXT afternoon when Smith met the Slugger, it was with a surly growl.

"Did I make a fool of myself last night?" he asked.

"You said you had fifty grand that would prove you killed Michael Osborne."

"Then I sure must've mopped up the liquor. I got the fifty grand all right, but I was just kiddin' about Osborne, Slugger. When I hit the bottle too hard—"

"Tryin' to make a monkey out o' me, huh? Doublecrosser, are you?"

"Can't you take a joke, Slugger?"

"Not that kind." Slugger was ugly. "You know what they do to doublecrossers around this place?"

"I wasn't tryin' to cross you, Slugger. I was just kiddin'."

"You're tryin' to doublecross me now on that bet. Of course, if you want to back out and break your word, that's up to you, but if the cops get wise that you killed Babson—"

"You—you wouldn't squeal, Slugger." Panic shone in Smith's eyes. "You wouldn't dare. I'd say you helped, and—"

Slugger grinned. "I got a watertight alibi, fellow. Think I didn't fix that before I started out?"

Smith's jaw dropped.

"But—"

"But nothing," Slugger grinned. "You keep your word and everything's jake. If you don't, I'll have plenty time to find that fifty grand while you're waitin' your turn for the hot seat. I hate doublecrossers worse than I do dicks."

Smith groaned. For long moments he was silent; then a gleam of cunning flashed in his eye.

"All right! Tonight I'll show you where Osborne's body is, Slugger, but—but if you ever squeal—"

"You sure gotta show me—or kick through with that fifty grand, see! You take your choice. I'll have the car at eleven again."

ONCE more Smith climbed behind the wheel that night and drove out to the country until the car turned into a winding lane and stopped in a deserted quarry.

"Right over behind that big rock you'll find Osborne's body," Smith said.

"Oh, yeah? You go first, and remember I'm packin' two rods."

Smith scrambled up the rocks, flashlight in hand.

"Down in this niche," he said, snapping the light on. Then he gave a gasp of dismay.

"It—it's gone, Slugger. Somebody—the dicks must've found it. Look out. Maybe they're staked out waiting for someone to come back and—"

"Forget it!" Slugger's eyes did not waver. "No danger of dicks here, because there never was a body here. Your bluff don't work."

"You callin' me a liar?"

"Sure!" The Slugger's gun barrel glittered menacingly in the faint moonlight. "You didn't kill Osborne, because I did. Now I'm goin' to show you the body, and then you're goin' to give me that fifty grand, see! Get goin'."

This time the Slugger's gun was pressed into Smith's ribs as he drove. Presently, at the Slugger's command, he turned into a lane to where a culvert drained a swamp.

"Get out! Get through the fence where that wire is loose. Now go ahead of me along the footpath!"

In single file they proceeded un-

til Slugger snapped a command to halt.

"Now peek in the bushes on your right!" he said.

A momentary flash of the spotlights was all Smith needed.

"You win!" he grunted. "I guess my bluff cost me fifty grand. I'll show you where it is, and then—"

"And then you'll dig it up for me, and if that's a bluff too, it's the last one you'll ever pull, buddy."

BACK to the farm they drove, Smith obviously ill at ease. This time he led the way softly, to a clump of bushes behind the house. At a pile of refuse he stopped, and scraped the top layer aside with his foot. Then with his hands he began to dig. Slugger Bates stood grimly by, listening intently, until Smith at last dug out a metal cash-box.

"There's the loot, Slugger," he said. "Open it up and get your money."

"Think I'm easy, don't you? Here, open it yourself. Don't you see I've got one hand full.

Slowly Smith pried the lid loose, disclosing a number of rolls of currency snapped about by elastic bands.

"Hand me one of them and I'll look and make sure it's what you say it is!"

As the Slugger reached eagerly for the roll, his gun hand wavered for a split second. As though he had been waiting for such a lapse, Smith flattened himself to the ground in a sudden dive. At the same moment came a flash of flame from the clump of bushes directly behind him.

Slugger's gun arm sagged limply. His weapon exploded harmlessly, the bullet thudding into the ground. But with an angry snarl he was already jerking his other

gun out. Smith threw himself forward. His arms wound about the Slugger's legs desperately, and the Slugger came down on top of him with a crash that winded him.

But even as the Slugger clubbed his gun to bring it crashing down on Smith's head, the spot was flooded with light. Half a dozen figures leaped upon him. He struggled desperately until handcuffs clicked about his wrists and ankles.

"Get that doublecrosser, too!" he shouted, pointing at Smith. "He croaked Babson last night, and—" His voice broke with a gasp as he stared at the figure before him. "Babson!"

"And very much alive, Slugger!" Babson drawled. Then he turned to Smith. "Get the goods on him, Jim?" he asked.

"Sure did, Terry. He swallowed everything when he thought he was going to get the fifty grand. Why, do you know, he even showed me the body."

A lurid oath burst from the Slugger's lips.

"So you are a dick, eh?"

"The correct name is Gordon. I told you I was responsible for his disappearance, didn't I?"

BUT I could've swore you bashed Babson's skull last night!" the Slugger muttered.

"Gordon's a great guy for fooling people, Slugger!" Babson drawled. "That blackjack was made of sponge. The blood you saw was raspberry cordial, and it came out of the sponge, not out of me. Movie stuff, savvy?"

"And now, if you'll get up off that roll of stage money you're sitting on, we'll find a better place for you to sit—a nice hot chair all fitted up with electrical gadgets. Now we've got the body, I guess we can have the murder case. Let's go!"

Death, *the* Champ



Detective Owen Couldn't Believe that Terry Reis, Fistic Star, Would Stage a Crooked Scrap—But Things Looked Phoney! And Then—

By GEORGE McNEIL

Author of "Murder at All Costs," "Sands of Death," etc.

DETECTIVE BILL OWEN had a battered nose, cauliflowered ears—and a sock in either fist. True, these manly attributes had been acquired in the line of duty and not in the prize

ring; but nevertheless, they qualified him to speak and act with authority on fights in general and on the one that was on at the Garden that night, in particular.

He had already spoken. Now he

decided to act and to act with the utmost haste.

He removed the stub of his black cigar from his mouth, scowled at it dourly, then tossed it away from him with an irritated gesture. It was hard for him to believe that Terry Reis, the champion, would fake a crooked fight for the benefit of the gamblers; yet no one knew better than Owen that money spoke louder than words.

As he walked down the narrow corridor that led to the champion's dressing room, the roar of the packed crowd in the Garden came to him like the thunder of a thousand subway trains. They were crying for blood! A vague, indefinable something stirred at the detective's heart.

He jostled into sports reporters, columnists, cameramen; nodded to fighters, promoters, managers. About the entire building there was the general excitement, chaos and confusion that always accompanies a championship match.

Then abruptly as he came to a halt before the door to Reis' dressing room, the scowl on his face deepened. Voices came to him from behind the portal—sinister voices raised in anger, voices that held an icy menace.

OWEN'S lips hardened; a sharp glint came to his eyes. He leaned against the jamb, listened a moment. And a moment was enough! His right hand dropped to the pocket of his coat, gripped the butt of the automatic there.

His left went out to the knob of the door. He wrenched it savagely, kicked it violently inward. Dramatic as his entrance had been, it was not half so dramatic as the dynamic tableau upon which he had burst.

Crowded against the far wall, a purple dressing gown over his supple shoulders, stood Terry Reis. His

face was hard, bitter—his eyes challenging. By his side crouched his manager, Eddie Rapp; and in contrast to the champion's, Rapp's face was white and drawn with fear.

And with good reason, too! Before the pair, twin automatics in their hands, stood Duffy Kilbain and Big Bill Martin. And the hungry snouts of those automatics were grinding at the ribs of the champion and his manager.

"As you were, boys!" growled Owen from the doorway. His automatic made a sinister bulge in his pocket. "Drop those gats!"

SLOWLY the twin automatics trickled from reluctant fingers and clattered to the floor. Reis promptly kicked them with the toe of his shoe and sent them slithering across the floor until they were lost beneath a locker.

Kilbain and Martin pivoted slowly. Their eyes flamed with a bitter hate as they took in the figure of the detective leaning in the doorway. For a long minute eyes met, clashed audibly. Then Owen grinned—a grin with no humor in it.

"So there was something back of all the talk?" he sneered.

Kilbain's ham-like hands knotted into hard fists at his side.

"You keep out of this, Owen!" he snarled.

Owen laughed unpleasantly.

"I'm in it up to my neck. But I'm telling you two crooked gamblers that if you don't keep out of it, you'll get it in the neck. I've got a hundred dollars bet on the champ. If he loses, I can take it." His voice suddenly hardened. "But he's got to lose on the level, see?" He turned to Reis. "What were they trying to do?"

Reis shrugged. "You know. Pull a dive in the fifth—or else!"

"I thought so," growled Owen. "And they call themselves gam-

blers! I have another name for them. Rats!"

Eddie Rapp, the champion's manager, wiped the sweat from his brow with a nervous hand.

"I'M glad you got here, Owen," he exhaled with relief. "Get these bums out of here and give the kid a chance to relax."

Owen nodded. "In two minutes, Eddie. But first, I got something to say. Get Hart and Pinelli in here."

Rapp left the dressing room hurriedly, leaving an uncomfortable, tense silence behind him. It was broken a moment later when he returned, trailing Battling Hart, the challenger, and his manager, Pinelli.

"Okay, boys," began Owen. "We're all here. This is not in the book of rules, but it goes just the same. We're going to lay down the rules of this fight right here, instead of in the ring. And they're this. Just one rule. This fight is on the level, see?"

"It always has been as far as I've been concerned," said Reis.

"Sure; you know me, Owen," Battling Hart agreed. "I got everything to win and nothing to lose by fighting on the level."

The detective nodded. "I felt pretty sure of you two boys." He turned to the gamblers. "These are the rats I'm worried about."

Abruptly he jammed the nozzle of his gun into the pit of Kilbain's stomach.

"Listen, Kilbain—and you, too, Martin! There's been a lot of talk about this fight. Crooked talk. It smells to heaven. And your two names are in it all the way. This fight is on the level—and the best man wins, see!"

Kilbain growled something unintelligible under his breath. Martin's eyes became hot pin-points—the eyes of a killer.

Owen's voice became savage.

"I don't care what your connections are—how much drag you got—if there's one little crooked thing about this fight, I'll sock it to you both, all the way! I'll bust your connections wide open! And as for drag—" he paused, jerked his thumb at himself—"it will be me who will be dragging you two pikers up the river. Got that?"

Kilbain nodded sullenly.

"You got us wrong, Bill," he began.

"You're damn right I did," Owen snarled. "I got you at the wrong time when you had the wrong gun on the wrong man!"

"Just a wise guy, eh?" sneered Martin.

Owen looked at him with hard eyes, shook his head patiently. "Not so wise, Martin, as tough. Tough enough to handle you, with or without gloves. Now get out! Both of you. If anything happens to the champ here, or to Hart—you two are it!"

SULLENLY the two gamblers retreated to the door. Owen slammed it behind them, then retrieved their automatics from beneath the lockers. He stowed them into his pocket, then turned to the two fighters.

"Here's wishing you both luck," he said.

"Thanks, Bill," said Reis. "You don't have to worry." He smiled at Hart, his challenger. "We're going in there and fight!"

"Right!" agreed Hart. "And on the level!"

Owen patted them both encouragingly on the back, headed for the door. "I'll be out there watching you—and some others!"

The fight had been the champion's all the way. A good, strong, clean fight.

Battling Hart had been willing enough, ready to mix and trade

blows. But he was simply outclassed.

Crouched down in his seat by the ringside, Detective Owen pulled at his cigar with satisfaction. Never before had he seen Reis with so much on the ball. His footwork was a joy to watch; his timing was perfect, and he packed liquid dynamite in either fist.

It was just a matter of time now until he put over a haymaker. Maybe the next round would see the finish.

OWEN grinned to himself, squinted through the clouds of smoke that fogged the ringside to where Kilbain and Martin were seated. He knew that the two gamblers had hedged their bets on the challenger. But it was one thing to break even on a fight and another to lose a small fortune that would have been theirs, if it hadn't been for the detective's interference.

Their faces were surly, their eyes bitter as they whispered together from crooked lips. Owen knew that they were plotting some particular hell for him. But he wasn't worried too much! He could take care of himself. If they—

The bell rang for the eighth round. He forgot all about the two gamblers, hitched forward in his chair and prepared himself for the finish. And it came more suddenly and dramatically than he had expected.

With the sound of the gong, Reis flashed out of his corner, light on his feet, fresh as a daisy. There was hardly a mark on him save a thin trickle of blood that ran down from a bruised lip.

Battling Hart answered the bell more slowly. It was obvious that he was tiring. Instead of meeting the champion's rush on the balls of his feet, he stood flatfooted, covered up, as Reis licked out with a long right.

It clipped Hart on the side of the jaw, snapped his head back. The blow was a heavy one, stung him into action. He weaved in suddenly, throwing lefts and rights to the champion's heart.

Reis grinned and liked it. He liked a good fight—liked to give the customers their money's worth. After all, wasn't he the champ? He was very confident. Hart had put up a good battle, but Reis would take him now at most any minute.

They stood toe to toe and slugged. Hart's head snapped back again, but with the courage of desperation he continued to bore in. He jolted two swift uppercuts to Reis's jaw. The champion stepped back a moment, and the crowd roared.

They wanted action—blood! And they got it!

THE tight smile still on his lips, Reis feinted Hart into an opening, crossed a right to the heart. Hart countered with a left, tried to land a right, missed and clinched.

The referee was between them in a flash. They broke cleanly, danced around a moment on tense legs, then were at it again with a sudden flurry of savage blows that set the crowd on their ears.

From the gallery the mob raved.

"Atta boy, Reis!"

"Kill him, Hart!"

"Watch his left there, you bum!"

Detective Owen was tense on the edge of his seat. With swift, sure eyes he followed every move of the two gladiators. No question about this fight being crooked. The boys were giving every ounce they had. More, were fighting cleanly, standing toe to toe to each other, taking and giving it.

Beneath the blaze of lights suspended above the arena their glistering bodies stood out in heroic proportions. Typewriters clicked, telegraph keys clattered, excited

radio announcers cried into amplifiers, reporting to a sport loving world a blow by blow description of the battle.

Reis had Hart in the latter's corner now. He was concentrating on the challenger's body. His fists flashed out like leather battering rams, thudded into yielding flesh with solid impacts. He was fresh, confident, sure of himself.

Hart was groggy. There was a wobble to his knees. But with indomitable courage he carried on. In a last wild, desperate effort, he threw his science to the winds, stepped in close, threw his right at Reis' jaw.

The blow found its mark, but it left him wide open. Like a striking cobra, Reis' left flashed out, landed smashingly above Hart's heart. His right was a second behind it. It landed solidly on the point of the challenger's chin. No human could have withstood that twin assault.

Hart went down, pawed about in the resin in his corner, then lay still. The Garden was a bedlam, then hushed to utter silence as the referee waved Reis to his corner and began to count over the prostrate gladiator.

"One—two—three—"

Hart stirred.

"Four—five—six—"

Hart was on one knee. The crowd went mad, tore the roof off the building.

"Seven—eight—"

HART pulled himself up by the ropes. His eyes were glassy; he was punch drunk—out on his feet. But the blood-hungry mob yowled for more!

The two gladiators rushed together. Reis was sick at heart. It was like hammering a defenseless hulk. The fight should have been stopped, but the referee had waved him in. There was only one other way to save the challenger from

merciless punishment. He had to put him away—now!

Hart, driven on by the courage of a lion, weaved in drunkenly. His arms flayed wildly. A blood-smeared glove crashed into Reis' lips. But there was no steam behind the blow.

Reis smiled, set himself for the merciful *coup de grace*. His right shot back; his muscles tensed. Every ounce of his strength was behind the blow as it started for the challenger's bloody chin.

But it never reached its destination!

Reis staggered a moment. A wild, startled look came over his face—the light faded from his eyes.

The howling mob screamed for the kill!

They got it! Reis plunged forward on his face—lay still—ominously still in a crumpled heap on the resin.

The referee began to count.

"One—two—"

Detective Owen catapulted from his seat like a fury. He flung himself toward the ring.

"To hell with counting!" he shouted at the referee. "Reis is out for good—he's dead. Murdered!"

And he was right; at least, in the first instance. And even though the official verdict of the Boxing Commission's doctor was death by heart failure, Owen felt sure that he was right in the second instance.

But how could Reis have been murdered in the spotlight before fifty thousand witnesses? Owen didn't know, but he meant to find out.

He was so sure that the champion's death had been deliberate murder, that he gave orders that everyone was to leave the dressing rooms as soon as possible; that nothing was to be removed from them—until he had been able to make a thorough investigation.

The detectives' room at Headquarters was hot, smoke-fogged

and tense. A green-shaded lamp shone down brilliantly on a battered wooden table. On one side of that table sat Detective Owen. His eyes were hard, bitter, relentless; his granite jaw was grim.

Opposite him sat Kilbain and Martin the gamblers. Drops of sweat beaded their foreheads; fear stared out of their glazed eyes. They had been through the mill. Owen had put the screws to them, and though they hadn't cracked yet—

Behind them in the shadows, sitting in uncomfortable silence unwilling witnesses to the grim scene, sat Eddie Rapp, Battling Hart and his manager, Pinelli.

Owen assaulted the table with his fist. He jabbed out an accusing finger.

"I told you two that if anything happened to the champ you would be *it*!" he snarled. "And, by God, I mean it! He was murdered!"

Kilbain smiled crookedly.

"You're nuts, Owen!" he croaked. "You know the doc said heart failure. How could we kill him before that mob?"

That was the one question that had been bothering Owen, but he didn't admit it.

"I don't give a rap how you did it!" he growled. "You two are going to take the rap!"

"It's a frame," Martin sneered. "You haven't got a thing on us. We didn't kill Reis—if he was killed. But I think you're screwy. It was just one of those things. You were there. It was a fight, wasn't it? It was on the level. Reis just collapsed from punishment."

"Nuts to that! Hart put up a good battle, but he hadn't hurt the champ."

Martin shrugged wearily. "Well, why pick on us?"

"Because you tried to frame the fight. And, by God, you did. Framed it with murder!"

"I want a lawyer!" whined Martin.

"You'll get one when you go on trial," said Owen heavily. "Now I'm going to give you—"

The phone on the edge of the desk clanged raucously. With an impatient gesture he yanked the instrument to him, growled savagely into the mouthpiece.

"Who? Yeah—he's here. Who wants him?" His eyes narrowed suddenly, and his lips pursed in a soundless whistle. "Listen. This is Detective Owen talking. I got a hunch this is murder. Give me the dope on that."

With a hairy fist he ground the receiver against his ear, and as he listened to the flow of hurried words coming over the wire to him, the frown on his brow became deeper and a far away speculative look came into his eyes. He nodded.

"Thanks," he said tersely. "I'll tell him."

He banged down the receiver, heaved his bulk back in the chair, and chewed absent-mindedly on the ragged stub of his cigar. Abruptly, he straightened up.

"You—Rapp! Come here. In the light where I can see you."

EDDIE RAPP, the dead champ's manager, stepped forward nervously. He looked at the detective with apprehensive eyes.

"I—honest to God—"

"Shut up! I haven't accused you of anything yet. But there's one thing you can explain, Eddie. How does it happen that just a week ago you took out a fifty thousand dollar insurance policy on Reis—double indemnity and all that. If he was killed in the ring you collected twice. Answer that one!"

"Why—" It was Rapp's turn to sweat. "Why, it was just good business!"

Owen jumped from his chair. "I'll

say it was good business. Murder for a hundred grand!"

"But you know what the doc said—"

"Shut up!" Owen paced the floor a moment. "It's murder, I tell you. I don't know how it was pulled, but, by heaven, I'll find out. Two crooked gamblers and an insurance policy for a hundred grand. I wonder—"

He broke off abruptly, went to the door, bawled out a swift order.

Two uniformed policemen appeared.

"Street 'em!" he growled.

IT was dark. Cautiously, silently, Detective Owen felt his way forward in the Stygian gloom. The blue steel of a glinting automatic flashed in his right fist. His left was extended before him, groping for the knob of a door. He found it, turned it noiselessly, opened the door a foot, and slipped into the dark interior beyond.

He flattened himself against the wall, waited a tense moment. His gun was ready for instant action. Every nerve was tense, alert. But no alien sound broke the somber, uncanny silence of the abysmal blackness.

Noiselessly, he eased a flashlight from his pocket, depressed the switch, and swung it about him in a swift arc. The tiny beam of light picked out a locker against the far wall, fighting togs, a training table in the center of the floor.

He stepped forward, then suddenly froze. His pulses leaped. An icy finger of death crawled down his spine. Some sixth sense, some premonition of danger, flashed a warning to his brain.

He jumped swiftly to one side, pivoted. But not swiftly enough! A sudden rush of air preceded the blow that crashed into his shoulder. His right arm went dead. His gun

clattered to the floor, followed a moment later by the flashlight.

In a blind fog of pain he grappled, closed with his assailant. His left shot up, found yielding flesh and bone. But there was no steam behind the blow.

Then an arm was raised, swiftly. Blue steel glinted in the night in a short arc, descended. The heavy butt of a revolver collided with his skull.

A bomb exploded in his brain. Vivid flashes of heliotrope split his eyeballs. He felt his knees buckle, knew he was passing out. He fought, more by the exertion of sheer will than bodily strength, against the wave of nausea that swept over him.

Dimly, as from a great distance, he heard a clattering noise—running feet—a deep voice yelling—demanding to know what was the matter—

Then the gun was raised again, descended. The crescendo roar of an express train sounded in his ears, drowning out all else. Then utter blackness. An abysmal void rushed up, engulfed him as he pitched headlong to the floor.

A FEW minutes later, he straightened up slowly, to gaze into a lighted torch in the hands of a night-watchman. Painfully, Owen explored the swelling lump on his head. He swore violently, fluently, felt for his gun and flashlight, found them. The torch had gone out when he had dropped it.

"That lump ain't nothin'," the watchman assured him. "Nothin' to what you'd a' got if I hadn't come along. A big guy had you down an' was gonna do you in. No—I didn't get a look at his face. He ducked his head an' almost knocked me down gettin' out the door the minute he seen me."

Who had been the assailant? Why

had he been there? Why the sudden attack? With a bitter curse, Owen realized that the answer was there in the room—something the fellow had come for. It was still there, if his attacker had not destroyed the evidence.

But the devil of it was, Owen didn't know what that evidence was. There were lots of questions about the murder of Terry Reis—despite the doctor's verdict, Owen still insisted it was murder—that he couldn't answer. But of one thing he was sure. The person who had slugged him was the killer!

The room was exactly as he had first seen it when he entered some few minutes before—exactly as it had been left last night. Nothing was disturbed. Owen dismissed the watchman and went over the room with a fine-tooth comb. He found many things, but not the thing he looked for. Method for murder.

With a sullen growl he started for the door. A pair of boxing gloves was lying on the floor. He had liked Terry Reis—liked him a hell of a lot. And now the kid had made his last fight and lost—lost to the greatest champion of all, Death.

Owen was a sentimentalist at heart. Those leather gloves, the symbol of the champ's last fight, stirred something in his heart. He picked them up, tucked them under his arm. He would keep them as a souvenir. A souvenir of the fight against Death!

THEN a vague thought stirred in his mind. He pounced upon it, elaborated it. Those gloves—lying on the floor. They had been hanging high on the wall just before his assailant landed on him.

His eyes became preternaturally sharp, his brain hot, as he worked it at top speed. Then inspiration struck and something clicked in his

mind that sent him out of there on the run.

A half-hour later, Owen barged impetuously into the office of the Medical Examiner. Dr. Durant looked up from his desk, smiled and shoved a box of cigars across his desk toward the detective. "You still think Reis was murdered?"

"I do that!" growled Owen. "More than before."

He selected a cigar with great care, bit off the end.

"Listen, Doc," he began. "I want you to do me a favor. I know the doctor up at the ringside said it was heart failure; and I know you agreed with that. But, as a pal, perform an autopsy for me?"

Dr. Durant looked puzzled. "You're serious. You've got something?"

OWEN pursed his lips. "I got an idea. If I'm right—somebody will burn for the job!"

Dr. Durant had worked with Owen before. He knew the futility of asking questions.

"What do you want me to test the body for first?" he asked.

"Poison!"

Durant rose from his chair, nodded crisply towards his desk. "There's a box of cigars. Sit down. Wait!"

Owen waited an impatient hour. Then the door opened. He jumped to his feet.

"So what?" he snapped.

Dr. Durant's face was sober.

"You were right." He nodded his head. "There was poison. Murder!"

"What kind of poison?"

"The most swift, sure and deadly—cyanide."

Owen's face was a grim, implacable mask as he started for the door. Durant caught him by the arm. "But, gosh, Owen, how could anyone administer cyanide to him in the ring before fifty thousand

people? It acts instantaneously. It could not have been administered to him before the fight started. Why—why—it's impossible!"

"Yeah?" flung back Owen. "That's what everybody thought."

"But how was it done?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to damn soon find out. What's the test for cyanide."

"A simple one." Durant scrawled rapidly on a sheet of paper. "Here's all the information you will need."

"Thanks, Doc," said Owen as he stuffed the paper into his pocket. "It looks like you're going to be a witness at a murder trial."

AT PRECISELY eleven o'clock the following morning, Detective Owen strolled casually into Billy Hillman's gymnasium on 42nd St. A bulky, unimportant looking package, wrapped in newspaper, was carried carelessly under one arm.

A cigar cocked jauntily out of one corner of his mouth, he looked genially about him. At the far end of the room, gathered around a ring, was a little knot of men.

They shifted uncomfortably at the detective's approach.

Owen greeted them affably.

"Hi, Kilbain—hi, Martin, nice of you to come."

"Nice, eh?" Kilbain sneered. "Don't hand me that line. We've been tailed ever since you streeted us last night. When are you going to take the 'eyes' off us?"

Owen laughed but didn't answer. Battling Hart, the new champion, was punching a bag in the ring. Owen turned to him, waved a friendly greeting, walked over to where Rapp and Pinelli were talking.

They looked up.

"Well, Rapp, anything to say about that insurance policy?"

Rapp ran the point of a dry tongue over drier lips. "Honest to God, Bill—"

"Save it." Owen turned to Hart, who was now skipping rope, jerked his head. "Come here a minute."

Hart dropped the rope, crossed over, and climbed through the ropes. "Still in training, eh?" asked the detective.

The other smiled, nodded his head. "Sure, why not? I'm the champ now."

"Yeah," said Owen. "I'm going to do a little training myself."

He took the package from under his arm, shook off the paper, revealing a pair of boxing gloves.

"You better do some training with your brains," Kilbain sneered.

"Yeah," mocked Martin. "You're all right on the muscle work, but when it comes to the bean—"

Owen laughed.

"Razzing me because I thought one of you bumped Reis? Well, my brainwork might not be as good as my footwork, but it isn't so bad. All I need now is a couple of rounds to stimulate it."

He held up the gloves.

"Recognize these. They were used last night in the fight. I'm keeping 'em for a souvenir. You're first, Kilbain—how about going a couple of rounds with me."

"Why don't you pick on somebody your size?" Kilbain sneered. Owen sized him up. He did have the edge on the gambler.

"But hell," continued the other. "I ought to be able to last one round with you."

Owen nodded.

"No; you'd be a set-up for me." He turned to Martin. "How about you?"

Martin tensed his bulging biceps.

"And how!" he accepted readily. "Nothing would please me better than to take a sock at you. Only I wish I could put a horseshoe into the glove."

Rapp stepped forward. "What about me, Owen?" he offered. "I

wouldn't mind taking a rap at you."

Pinelli, a short, squat Italian, sized up the detective.

"And I think I could take you, myself," he decided. "What do you think of that?"

Owen grinned tolerantly. "I'll give you all a chance later."

Then his eyes became cold. He whirled on the new champ.

"How about you, Hart? These mugs are too easy for me." He shoved the gloves in his hands before the other's nose. "Just a couple of rounds with these gloves. What do you say?"

Hart never said it with words. He lashed out suddenly with his fist. Owen rolled under the blow, ducked, side-stepped—closed. Sudden commotion—chaos!

In two swift, savage blows, Hart gave Owen another cauliflower ear. The detective took it, bored in. His iron fist sank deep into the champion's stomach.

HART grunted, his knee came up in a foul blow, caught the detective in the groin. Owen slumped. Hart wrestled him, mauled him, smashed his fist to the detective's jaw. Then with a sudden movement he wrenched at the gun on Owen's hip. Owen was groggy, but he was just beginning to fight. That savage jerk on the gun in his holster lashed him to furious life. His left hand froze to Hart's wrist, clung there desperately. His right slashed forward in a sledgehammer blow.

Hart's knees buckled.

Owen's fist moved with the speed of a rapier and with the kick of a mule. It landed flush on the point of the champion's chin. He went down slowly, joint by joint. His eyes glazed over. The detective stood panting over him.

"That was the punch Reis was going to give you—just before you murdered him!" he gritted.

He whirled furiously on the others. "Anybody else?"

But no one accepted the challenge. They were too shocked, too dumbfounded by the startling declaration that had followed it.

"MURDERED Reis, you said?" whispered Rapp.

"Right!" grated Owen.

"But how? There were a million people there. Coppers, dicks—you were sitting at the ringside."

Owen nodded.

"But he murdered him just the same. Right before our eyes. Hart was foxy, clever. He had plans of his own. Most of all he wanted to be champ. Well, he was, for a day. This is how he did it. He knew that Reis had it all over him like a tent. So before going into the ring he put some cyanide flakes on his shoes. He rubbed those deadly crystals into the resin in his corner.

"Then, in that last round, when he was groggy and Reis knocked him down, he rubbed his gloves in that resin—in that deadly cyanide. One tiny speck of it is deadly!"

"My God!" whispered Pinelli.

"Yes," growled Owen. "Hart's blows never killed Terry Reis. It was the cyanide on his gloves. He brushed them against Terry's lips. There was an open bruise there. And it killed him instantly."

"How did you tumble to all that?" asked Pinelli.

"I wouldn't have tumbled at all if Hart hadn't tried to get rid of the gloves. From then on it was a cinch. That is, to figure out how Reis was killed. But I still didn't know which of you did it.

"So I staged that little training session of mine. Hart was the only one who didn't want to take a crack at me—if I used these gloves."

"Hell!" said Martin with reluctant admiration. "Your brain is as good as your sock."

Death Arrow



He crouched, raising the knife high over his head

*John Vance Plans the Perfect Crime in this Gripping
Yarn of Greed and Gore That Packs
a Pulse-Stirring Thrill!*

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "Flood," "Brigands of the Unseen," etc.

JOHN VANCE stood in the shadowed darkness of a willow tree and watched old man Harper leave the hotel grounds. His opportunity had come! Within a few

minutes now the old man would be dead.

Vance stood trembling—but not with fear; he was perfectly calm—trembling with eagerness to do this

thing he had so carefully planned. He had everything to gain, nothing to lose, because every circumstance conspired to make this murder safe for him. They would never find the murderer—and he, of everyone, would be least suspected.

He turned from the shadowed outskirts of the hotel grounds and followed the old man.

The path was heavily lined with willows, with woods and thick underbrush on one side, and the dark waters of a mountain lake ten feet away on the other side. Vance was in no hurry. He went about five hundred feet, selected a black thicket beside the path and crouched, waiting.

The old man would be coming back shortly, he knew. It was only a thousand feet from the hotel, along this lake path, to Harper's big summer bungalow. The time was now about nine o'clock. Vance, who lived at the hotel, had observed that although the old man often spent his evenings there—talking with friends, or playing billiards or bridge—at least once during the evening he went home for a few minutes.

VANCE had been awaiting tonight's trip. He crouched, gripping the knife in his pocket, listening to the distant strains of the dance orchestra at the hotel; and the sighing of the night-breeze through these somber willows; and the lapping of the lake on its rocky shore. And listening for the old man's returning footsteps.

Harper would pass here. Then Vance would leap, strike fairly high, between the shoulder blades. So simple. Everything was ready now. Vance contemplated how clever he had been.

John Vance was nearly thirty now. Through a checkered, adventurous career, he had always kept himself charming to women, with

the idea that he would like to marry riches.

He was a tall, handsome fellow, with an exceedingly polished manner. He capitalized it.

Long wavy black hair; he felt it made him look like Lord Byron. He always wore his eye-glasses on a heavy black ribbon and dangled them from a little hook on his shirt bosom.

He didn't really need the eye-glasses, but they gave him a distinctive, George Arliss look.

VANCE was that way; he calculated everything—just as he had calculated every angle of this murder.

Until now, he had had no luck in marrying riches. Rich widows were wary; rich old maids were dour. Then Vance had met Gracie Harper. She was seventeen—tall, willowy, with a face like a cameo. She was the old man's niece. His only relative—and his sole heir. Vance had made sure of that.

Falling in love with Gracie Harper was very easy for Vance. And he had made her love him, promise to marry him next month when she was eighteen. It had been quite a feat, for Vance had everything against him.

This summer resort was filled with people crazy about archery. The Arden Archery Club was on the lake near the hotel. Gracie was a member and a skilled archer; so were all her friends.

Gracie had a whole jargon of archery technicalities to which Vance had been forced to listen and show enthusiasm.

He knew nothing of archery and cared less. Perhaps for that reason nobody around the club seemed to like him. That was a handicap at first, with Gracie. Then, when the old man learned of his niece's growing attachment, he had violently op-

posed it. There had been several quarrels.

Unsophisticated, romantic Gracie! She had stood firm in her love for Vance. Romantically she had declared that they did not want her uncle's money when the old man said that he would disinherit her. He had not changed his will yet—but he would, the moment Gracie married.

So Vance had decided that the old man must die. And the fool archery was an additional opportunity. Harper would be found with an arrow in his back! At least thirty young men and women around here were skillful archers—and everyone realized that John Vance hardly knew how to hold a bow!

He tensed suddenly. The old man's returning footsteps were audible. Then the blob of him showed on the path. It passed Vance.

The leap was almost soundless. Undoubtedly the old man never knew what struck him. He seemed to groan as he fell, with Vance on top of him thrusting the knife in. Gruesome, but so brief. It was all over in a moment, and Vance was again on his feet with the dripping knife in his hand.

He had the sense to hold it well away from him. Then, as though it were a viper that would sting him, he flung it far out into the deep lake waters. It made only a tiny splash on the rippled surface.

FOR a moment Vance stood panting, listening. But there had been no alarm. No noise here save the old man's faint groan, and the thud of his falling body. Vance bent over the body now. It lay face down, with feet and legs diagonally in the path, head and shoulders on a sward of mouldy leaves and fern-clumps. Arms outstretched. Dead, undoubtedly.

Vance was trembling now. He

mastered a wild instinct to run, to get away from the thing lying there. But he wasn't quite finished yet. He had hidden the bow and arrows in the woods near here. He had no idea to whom they belonged; and it made no difference.

He had watched for several evenings to see how they could be stolen from the clubhouse; and early tonight he had gotten them successfully. He had hidden them here—and very likely the owner had not yet even missed them.

HE went now to the thicket and got them. A panic of haste was on him, but he fought with it. This was all wrong, getting frightened. He must be calm now, do everything just right. There was no danger; he needed only five minutes. Then he would be back, mingling again with the hotel guests. Dancing with Gracie in another five or ten minutes.

He found the bow, and one arrow. He had left two arrows here—in case he broke one, or something. But now he could only find one. Queer! For half a minute, with accursedly clumsy, trembling fingers, he fumbled in the darkness of the thicket. The confounded thing was here, of course. But it was so much like the thicket twigs, and he was afraid to light a match.

Then he gave up looking. The second arrow was lost, but no matter. He only needed one, if he was careful. He went back to the body, stood cautiously listening. Then he strung the bow. It was a huge crescent, as long as himself. It seemed to take all his strength to bend the thing. He tugged at it awkwardly, but he managed to get it done.

Then he bent over the body again. The old man wore a pongee jacket. The knife-slit showed in his back, with blood there. Very carefully,

(Continued on page 114)

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(Continued from page 113)

Vance ripped the jacket-slit a trifle wider.

It made enough of a mark. He stood facing the body, with feet close against its shoulders, straddling the head. He put the bow-string into the arrow nock by the little tuft of feathers, and drew back the arrow. Awkward business!

Amazing what strength it took to get this right hand back against his chest.

WAS this the way they held it? What difference? He didn't have to hit a distant target, but only that crimson slit in the dead thing's back, less than a foot from the arrow head.

He loosed the arrow. It went with tremendous force. Vance, leaning forward and awkwardly stooping, all but lost his balance. But he had hit his mark.

The arrow was deeply buried in the knife-wound. It stood there quivering, so realistic!

Vance turned and hurried away. He hid the bow in the bushes near the arrow he had lost. He expected they would both be found.

Everything was correct now. The panic was leaving him; he was calm again.

In a few moments more he was back at the hotel, strolling through the grounds, nonchalant as George Arliss with his glasses and black ribbon.

His room was on the ground floor with access to the side veranda. No one noticed him entering it, but he wouldn't have cared if they had.

He didn't light a light; but there was enough illumination from the gay Chinese lanterns strung around the grounds outside. He examined the coatsleeves of his dark grey summer flannel suit, and the cuffs of his shirt. No sign of blood. He was sure

(Continued on page 116)

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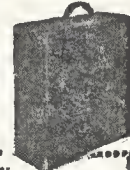
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(Continued from page 114)

of that anyway; he had been very careful.

He smoothed his hair, adjusted his necktie, then strolled back outside. Immaculate, perfectly dressed, in absolute taste for this informal summernight hotel dance. Who would ever guess that he had just killed a man?

Then presently he was dancing with Gracie. She was all his now. Fragrant, beautiful—and rich. What a prize!

Soon, maybe, someone would miss the old man. He had been playing billiards. After a while they'd think he had been gone too long.

Somebody would go after him, perhaps.

Gracie said suddenly, "John dear, what's the matter with you? You're panting—all out of breath. Are we dancing too fast?"

He never had to answer. The hotel rang suddenly with a turmoil. Old man Harper dead! Killed with an arrow!

Murdered!

IT was amazing how quickly the dark and silent woods were ringing with confusion. The tramp of crowding people, shouting voices; everyone milling with an awed curiosity at the starkly tragic scene of murder. Vance found his own role, excited curiosity, so easy.

And, of course, he had to take care of Gracie—keep her away from the dead thing lying there in the path with the hotel doctor now bending over it. He had to keep her from going into hysteria. It was a terrible shock to her, of course, but she was standing it well. A sudden burst of tears; then she was calm. She was pale, frightened, trembling—watching, wide-eyed, this eerie drama of the woods.

"Hadn't you better go back to the
(Continued on page 118).

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(Continued from page 116)

hotel, Gracie? I'll find someone to take care of you."

"No—no, John—I want to stay here. Poor Uncle—and I wasn't very kind to him these last weeks—"

She stood clinging to Vance. He was a little sorry for that. Gracie, the old man's only relative, had a prominence here, and Vance would have preferred to stay away from her, just for now. But that was a foolish idea. What harm could there be in comforting this weeping, stricken girl?

Of everyone here, only Gracie might guess that John Vance was not very sorry the old man was dead. Did she suspect anything? He was confident she did not. She loved him too much for that.

Between scudding grey clouds, the moon was now showing. Under the melancholy drooping willows, the moonlight laid lacy patterns of light and shade. Beside a tree-trunk, Vance stood quiet with Gracie, with the crowd from the hotel milling around them, and this which had been old man Harper lying here with the arrow slanting up.

The village policemen were on the scene now—three of them. The coroner had been sent for; he would take charge of the body.

Sergeant Blake was with the hotel doctor. Vance knew the sergeant slightly; had seen him around town, chatted with him a few times. Blake and Dr. Jones stood over the body, whispering. Nobody had touched anything; they were waiting for the other officials to arrive.

Eerie beams of flashlights were darting through the underbrush of the woods—a search which somebody had suggested, to see if any clues might be found. Vance chuckled to himself. They'd find the bow, of course.

Then there was a shout. One of
(Continued on page 120).

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(Continued from page 118)

the policemen, going forward, came back with the bow—and an arrow. The arrow Vance had lost. But what of it? he thought. A group of young men gathered around the bow and arrow.

"Looks like Ollie Ryder's bow."

"Sure does. Five foot eleven self-bow with double fish-joint."

"An' these arrows! This one we found in the woods—an' the one—in him. Both the same. Red deal arrows, weight five shillings. Three peacock body feathers on each. Looks to me like those new arrows Ollie Ryder bought—"

THIS jargon! All these young men archers trying to be detectives and dope this thing out all at once!

Then suddenly Vance's heart leaped and began pounding. It seemed that so many hostile glances were being cast at him as he stood here with Gracie's arm around him! But that was only his imagination. All nonsense. He, of everyone here, could never be suspected of this. What about Ollie Ryder? Why didn't this police sergeant want to see Ollie Ryder?

Vance had no idea he was voicing such a thing. He had meant to keep absolutely silent. Amazingly he heard stammered words burst from him:

"I wonder—I wonder where Ollie Ryder is?"

It brought a look from Sergeant Blake. The sergeant had drawn several of the young men to him and was asking them questions. Then Ollie Ryder came forward. He was a young fellow, fat, with a cherubic moon-face.

He had just been married; his young wife clung to him. Both were evidently frightened.

"My bow? My arrows?" Ollie stammered. "Looks like it. My Lord

(Continued on page 122)

"Stop Worrying..."

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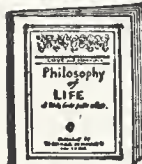
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(Continued from page 120)

—somebody steal 'em? I didn't know it."

Wouldn't these policemen arrest Ollie Ryder? It didn't seem so. Not yet, anyway.

This accursed jargon! Accursed technicalities of archery! Somebody was saying:

"Sergeant Blake, no archer did this thing. It's impossible!"

The sergeant said, "I know it."

But how did he know it? Everybody here seemed to know it. Somebody was saying:

"With Mr. Harper standing on his feet, that arrow would point upward, toward the tree tops. A long-range, high-arch trajectory would strike its target at that angle—but you can't shoot at long range through these woods. Or a fellow wouldn't try to shoot a bow and arrow from a tree-limb. He couldn't hit anything that way."

The sergeant was quietly smiling.

"You fellows have it all figured out, haven't you? Matter of fact, you're right." His gaze suddenly went to Vance. Accursed circumstances that made Gracie stand here clinging, and brought attention on Vance! The Sergeant added abruptly: "Your name is John Vance, isn't it? I remember you."

"Y-yes. Of course." He fought with the horrible stammer in his voice. "That's my name, Sergeant. Acquaintance—I mean friend of the family. Miss Harper here—"

"So Dr. Jones tells me."

WHAT had Dr. Jones told him? What did Dr. Jones know? Vance went cold inside. What rotten luck if this country doctor had been a confidant of old man Harper! Did he know they had quarreled over Gracie?

But Vance steadied himself. That wouldn't prove anything. Even a

(Continued on page 126)

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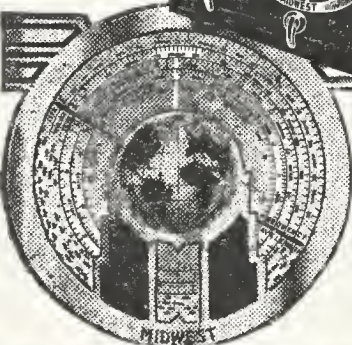
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Many members favor the adoption of a badge insignia for this organization. What do you think? Next month there will be an important announcement in regard to this plan. Stand by for further information—and meanwhile, keep writing me! Your suggestions, opinions and comments are mighty welcome—and helpful.

Here's a glimpse into our mail box—a batch of interesting quota-

tions from the recent letters of FRIENDS:

I have done many fingerprint jobs, and am constantly studying fingerprinting and Secret Service work. I certainly enjoyed reading THE CRIME CASTLE—give us more like it!—*W. E. Thomas, South Bay, Florida.*

Your magazine improves every month.—*Andrew Murphy, 584 West 162nd St., N. Y.*

FRIENDS OF THE PHANTOM should have local chapters all over the country. I'm willing to work to help put this idea across. What do the rest of you fellows think?—*George H. Duncan, 3530 N. W. 17th Ave., Miami, Fla.*

In addition to the novel, I certainly enjoy True Phantom Facts and The Phantom Speaks. I always read THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE from cover to cover. I'm in favor of a badge, but would like to have it a little different than the insignia on the membership card.—*Joe E. Powers, 1113 North Wood St., Chicago, Ill.*

My friends and I have formed a club dedicated to the ideals of the Phantom. We have fingerprinting supplies and are training ourselves to be real crime-fighters. We all think THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE is the finest magazine we ever read.—*George Schriver, 422 F. St., Sparrows Pt., Md.*

THE CRIME CASTLE is the best yet. It's certainly swell the way every story you have, is better than the last; and they're all good! I'm for a badge, one that looks like the insignia on the card. I hope lots of members write in their ideas for a badge, so that a decision as to the design can be reached.—*W. J. Jenkins, Jr., Route 5, Marietta, Ga.*

Excitement! Thrills! Adventure! That's what I find when I read THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE.—*Roy W. Neumann, 109 Ocean Ave., Laurel Beach, Milford, Ct.*

I believe in universal fingerprinting, and would like to know what others think of
(Concluded on page 128)



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DEATH ARROW

(Continued from page 122)

motive for murder was not the slightest proof of guilt. Vance had only to be his smiling, suave self.

"You don't know much about archery, do you?" the sergeant was asking.

Vance smiled. "No, I don't."

"Never shot an arrow?"

What was he getting at?

"No, I don't believe I ever have, Sergeant. But it must be very interesting."

"Very interesting," the sergeant echoed. "A lot of interesting things in this. It wasn't the arrow that brought death. As these young men say, you couldn't murder a man like that. Nobody could. Matter of fact—there's something very like a knife-wound under the arrow. And you can see where the murderer must have ripped the coat with his fingers."

So this detective had doped all that out! What difference?

"It looks," the sergeant added, "as though the murderer most positively knows nothing about archery. He did too many things that no archer would do. They tell me, for instance, that the fifty-pound drawing power of that bow makes it unsuitable for that arrow. That arrow is too long. An archer instinctively wouldn't have used it."

Was it an accusation? How could he accuse Vance, just because somebody who wasn't an archer did this thing? The sergeant abruptly turned away. What a relief! Somebody had quietly drawn Gracie from Vance. A woman and two girls were standing with her now. But Vance hardly noticed it.

He stood alone with his back against the tree-trunk. So many hostile glances, unmistakable now, were being flung at him.

"You, Ollie Ryder—come here a minute," Blake called. "Hold this

bow. Show me how you'd shoot an arrow down into that body."

"Sergeant," someone said suddenly, "there's a feather missing from that arrow. You noticed that, didn't you? Both the arrows were the same. See, here's the one that was hidden in the woods. It has three feathers."

"Thanks: I noticed that," said Blake dryly. "An' the one in the body has only two feathers. Queer enough—a feather lost! Come here, Ryder. Hold this bow."

A feather lost? What did that mean? How had he lost a feather from that arrow? Vance stood tense, watching Ollie and the sergeant. Ollie was standing straddling the head of the dead thing, trying to get into position to shoot an imaginary arrow downward. And in the silence of the woods, with all these people breathlessly staring, Vance could hear the sergeant's voice:

"There—I guess that's about the way he did it, don't you think? Now—you draw the string well back, don't you? He'd instinctively try to draw that long arrow to its head. Quite a pull, isn't it, Ryder? A powerful fellow, this murderer. I've got a hunch—want to see where your hand comes—"

Weird, how Ollie was doing it so nearly as Vance remembered he had done it himself! Ollie's hand drawing back the bow-string! Ollie leaning awkwardly forward.

The right lapel of Ollie's coat dangled in his way; he shook himself to knock the lapel aside so that he could draw his right hand back. Strange! To Vance's whirling

(Concluded on page 129)

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THE PHANTOM SPEAKS

(Concluded from page 124)

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DEATH ARROW

(Concluded from page 127)

thoughts now came a fleeting memory that he himself had done just that. Then there was the sergeant's voice.

"Good Lord—a hunch! If only it's true!" He deserted Ollie. He whirled around. "You, Vance—hold up your hands!"

What was this? Vance heard himself stammering: "Why—what—"

"Hold your hands over your head! Quick now!"

Involuntarily Vance's hands went up. The moonlit woods and all these staring faces whirled before him. What nonsense was this?

The sergeant came with swift strides. His last stride was a pounce. He jerked the open lapels of Vance's coat aside, exposed the front of his shirt. One of the other policemen turned a flashlight on it.

What was this? In the whirling chaos there was the sergeant's grim triumphant voice:

"And there it is! You've lost your game, Vance!"

For a stricken instant Vance stared down at his shirt front. That arrow he had shot into old man Harper's back! The arrow had had three feathers. His hand had drawn the little clump of feathers back against his chest. Then the arrow went down into the body—and it had only two feathers when it got there!

And Vance saw the missing feather now! It was still there, caught in the little eye-glass hook on his shirt front!

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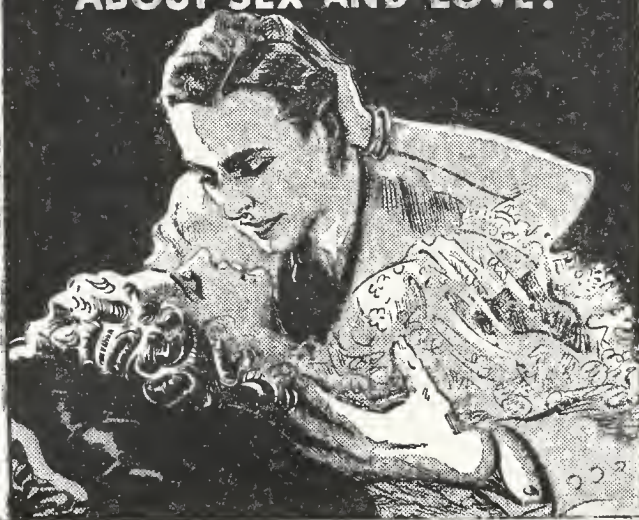


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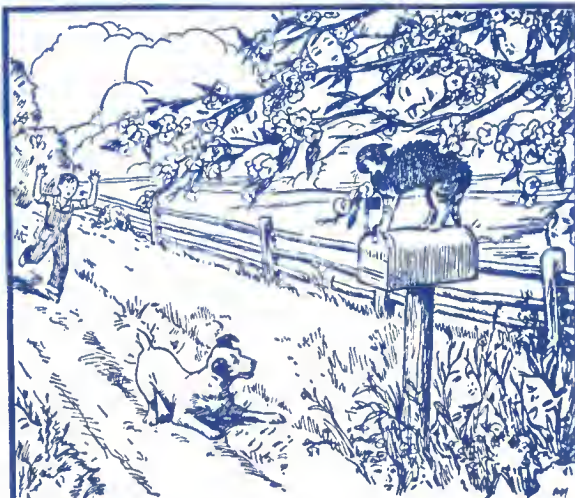
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I PAID \$200.00

to J. D. Martin, of Virginia
for Just One Copper Cent

"Please accept my thanks for your check for \$200.00 in payment for the copper cent I sent you. I appreciate the interest you have given this transaction. It's a pleasure to do business with a firm that handles matters as you do. I wish to assure you it will be a pleasure to me to tell all my friends of your wonderful offer for old coins."

Julian D. Martin, Va.

This is but one of the many similar letters we are constantly receiving. Post yourself! It pays! We paid Mr. Manning, New York, \$2,500.00 for a single silver dollar. Mrs. G. F. Adams, Ohio, received \$740.00 for some old coins. We paid W. F. Wilharm, of Pennsylvania, \$13,500.00 for his rare coins. I paid J. T. Neville, of North Dakota, \$200.00 for a \$10 bill he picked up in circulation. Mr. Mehl paid \$1,000.00 to Mr. J. E. Brownlee, of Heardmont, Ga., for one old coin. Mr. Brownlee, in his letter to Mr. Mehl, says: "Your letter received with the check for \$1,000.00 enclosed. I like to deal with such men as you and hope you continue buying coins for a long time." In the last thirty years we have paid hundreds of others handsome premiums for old bills and coins.

All Kinds of Old Coins, Medals, Bills and Stamps Wanted

\$1.00 to \$1,000 paid for certain old cents, nickels, dimes, quarters, etc. Right now we will pay \$50.00 for 1913 Liberty Head nickels (not buffalo), \$100.00 for 1894 dimes ("3" Mint), \$8.00 for 1863 quarters (no arrows), \$10.00 for 1866 quarters (no motto), \$200.00 each for 1884 and 1885 Silver Trade Dollars, etc., etc.

Big Cash Premiums for Hundreds of Coins Now Circulating

There are literally thousands of old coins and bills that we want at once and for which we will pay big cash premiums. Many of these coins are now passing from hand to hand in circulation. Today or tomorrow a valuable coin may come into your possession. Watch your change. Know what to look for.

FILL OUT AND MAIL NOW!

To

B. MAX MEHL

133 Mehl Building, Fort Worth, Texas



Dear Mr. Mehl: Please send me your Large Illustrated Coin and Stamp Folder and further particulars, for which I enclose 4 cents.

Name

Address

City State

B. MAX MEHL
133 Mehl Building

Dir. of Numismatic Co. of Texas.
FORT WORTH, TEXAS.